

Theatre of the Real and Precarity 2000 - 2018

**Indexical traces of the real in the theatrical work of Alecky
Blythe, Tim Crouch and Kim Noble**

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Poppy Ann Corbett, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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List of Abbreviations

EU – European Union
NT – The Royal National Theatre
OED – Oxford English Dictionary
UK – United Kingdom
US – United States of America

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Abstract

This thesis argues that contemporary English theatre since the millennium is marked by a distinctive engagement between the real and precarity. Throughout 2000 – 2018, theatre of the real has proliferated and diversified in form. I show that this has also been defined by a dramaturgical shift in practitioner intent: in theatre, it is now no longer *what* the real is that matters, but *how* it functions. I focus on the theatre practitioners Alecky Blythe, Tim Crouch, and Kim Noble and use a mixture of performance and textual analysis, to investigate how the real functions in contemporary theatre. The analysis explains the reasons for the burgeoning interest in this genre, and the shift in ideological focus.

Following accounts that argue the post-millennial period is a new ‘age of anxiety’, I evaluate the precarity that has characterised 2000 – 2018. This precarity destabilises the idea of secure realities and identities, and this instability is reflected in theatrical content and forms. In order to respond to this precarity, practitioners use the three key indexical traces of the real in performance – the archive, presence and technology – which work together as a ‘reality braid’ that substitute placeholders for reality into the unstable gaps created by precarity. I reveal that indexical traces of the real in contemporary English theatre play an important role in staging an affective response to this precarity.

INTRODUCTION

I think we have a thirst for reality.

– Peter Brooks (1)

The turn to real: theorising 2000 - 2018

Many thinkers, critics and artists agree there has been a recent ‘turn’ to the real in a range of cultural forms, taking place at the end of the twentieth century, and moving into the twenty-first. Slavoj Žižek claims the “ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real”, revealed by events such as 9/11 (*Welcome...* 5-6). Alain Badiou attests that the twentieth century has been “aroused by a passion for the real” and with the advent of the twenty-first century, this “passion” appears to have intensified in character and interest (52). In 2010, David Shields succinctly expressed the burgeoning fascination with the real in art as the eponymous “reality hunger”. In *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, he claims an “artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-yet-unstated one, is forming” that is focused on the real (5). Hal Foster’s *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (2015) argues that art is moving away “from its privileging of the imagistic and the textual and toward a probing of the real and the historical” (1). Some scholars use other terms to describe this phenomenon: for instance, Daniel Schulze claims “[w]e are living in a culture which seeks authenticity” (251).

This thesis investigates the significance of this turn to the real for theatre, in which the real has always occupied a central and contentious place – a “vexed” relationship, according to Liz Tomlin (*Acts and Apparitions* 7). I contend that the undercurrent of a majority of the theatrical work produced since the millennium has been characterised by an increased need to access and understand the real. This view is not shared by all: some scholars argue that there has not been a particular theatrical movement breaking ground in the way the ‘angry young men’ of the 1950s – 60s, and the ‘in-yer-face’ playwrights of the 1990s did.¹ The scholar Graham Saunders argues that, following the 1990s, “we can’t think in terms of ‘wave theory’

¹ For more on the ‘angry young men’ and their influence see *The Angry Years: The Rise and Fall of the Angry Young Men* by Colin Wilson (2007), *Anger and After: Guide to the New British Drama* by John Russell Taylor (1977), *Modern British Playwriting: The 1950s* by David Pattie (2012), and Dan Rebellato’s important *1956 And All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (1999). For literature pertaining to the ‘in-yer-face’ generation see *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001) and *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s* by Aleks Sierz (2012).

anymore” (in Aragay, Klein et al. 174) and suggests that when “attempting to assess a decade in British culture or politics, critics often grasp towards a received or truncated view” (in D’Monté and Saunders 1). Similarly, the critic Andrew Haydon characterises the first decade of the new millennium as one in which “it could be claimed [...] there had not been any single revolutionary moment” (40).

In contrast to Saunders and Haydon, I contend that there has been a dominant theatrical wave – the wave of the real – and that this has been well documented. Indeed, Carol Martin coined the umbrella phrase “theatre of the real”, bringing together common terms including ‘theatre of actuality’, ‘reality theatre’ and ‘documentary theatre’ used to describe “theatre’s participation in today’s addiction to and questioning of the real” (*Theatre of the Real* 5). Martin argues that the first two decades of the twenty-first century have been dominated by theatre of the real productions, alongside wider cultural anxiety about ‘reality’: “[c]ontemporary theatre of the real has proliferated at the same time that, for better or worse, there is a great expansion of ideas about ‘reality’” (*Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* 2). Looking at the output of the theatre intended to reflect and characterise the entire nation – the National Theatre of Great Britain (NT) – is a key marker of theatre of the real’s domination. In 2014, in an unprecedented move, the NT had three theatre of the real plays running simultaneously, a first in the history of the building: DV8’s *JOHN*, David Hare’s *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, and Fatboy Slim and David Byrne’s *Here Lies Love*.² Not only did these plays use real stories, but the forms adopted to tell these stories were unusual: *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* was an adaptation of Katherine Boo’s prize-winning non-fiction book of the same title; *JOHN* told the story of a man through the dance and physical theatre typical of DV8’s practice; and *Here Lies Love* explored the tale of the life of Imelda Marcos, through the medium of a rock musical. The commitment of the National Theatre to staging different forms of documentary theatre indicates that by 2014 theatre of the real was not only a popular Fringe curiosity in England, but also a major national trend.³ Other scholars have noted theatre of the real’s

² This observation was made by Chris Megson during his talk at the National Theatre’s public study event ‘In Context: Documentary and Verbatim Theatre’, 25 November 2014.

³ Indicative of theatre of the real’s acceptance amongst the mainstream is also the increase in academic study of the subject. Forsyth and Megson note in their introduction to *Get Real* that their book was a necessary intervention partly because “documentary theatre projects have become a staple feature of drama school and university curricula” (1). Modules created in this decade include “Documentary Theatre” at the University of Aberystwyth; “Theatre of Memory and Autobiography” at the University of Exeter; “Performing Lives: Theory and Practice of Autobiographical Theatre” at the University of Kent; “Theatre Works: Writing, Memory, Labour” at Kings College London and “Staging The Real” at Royal Holloway, University of London. Specialist centres were founded to collaboratively respond to this contemporary moment: King’s College London’s Centre

move to the mainstream: Cyrielle Garson's PhD thesis states that verbatim theatre has expanded "the British mainstream theatre vocabulary" (26) and Middeke, Schnierer and Sierz describe how "[in] the aftermath of 9/11, it was hard to avoid politics, and the fashion for verbatim theatre influenced even fictional stories" (xiv).

Verbatim drama – a strand of documentary theatre – has been the most prevalent form of theatre of the real throughout this period. Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage's significant theatrical study of the start of this century recognises that "if there is a truncated view to be offered of the new millennium's drama to date – in the UK, at any rate – perhaps it is here, with the story of verbatim drama" (3). Other critics and scholars also note its contemporary importance. For example, Andrew Haydon suggests verbatim theatre is: a "good way to understand how theatre developed in the 2000s" ('Theatre in the 2000s' 41) and in 2012, the *Guardian's* theatre critic Michael Billington remarked, "[w]hat is astonishing is how ubiquitous it has become". In 2014, Billington reaffirmed his position stating verbatim theatre "is now accepted as a valid theatrical form [...] it is far too deeply rooted to disappear". Tomlin supports the observation that the documentary form was in the ascendant at the start of the twenty-first century: "[e]merging out of the prevailing climate of scepticism in the final decade of the twentieth century was the revitalisation of documentary forms of theatre in the first decade of the twenty-first" (*Acts and Apparitions* 114).

Although I begin my study in 2000, this is not to claim that theatre had no prior interest in the real. In fact, far the opposite, as Mary Luckhurst observes: "[f]or the last two decades theatre, film and television have reflected a growing obsession with the real throughout the world" (*Playing For Real* 1). In theatre, this "obsession" has been especially noticeable due to the wide variety of proliferations in theatrical form, as Chris Megson and Alison Forsyth note: "this eclecticism shows little sign of abating as forms of fact-based theatre continue to diversify and capture the public imagination" (*Get Real* ix). The past two decades have produced: verbatim musicals, such as Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork's *London Road* (2011), and Hadley Fraser and Josie Rourke's *Committee... (A New Musical)* (2017); theatrical 'hoaxes' such as Stewart Laing and Pamela Carter's *Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (2013), Tim Crouch's *Adler and Gibb* (2014) and Dennis Kelly's fake verbatim play *Taking Care of Baby* (2007); autobiographical solo performances including Nic Green's *Fatherland* (2013), Kim Noble's *You're Not Alone* (2014), and Jenna Watt's *Faslane*

(2016), as well as numerous other theatrical games, innovations and stories that all pull their threads from real-life stories, voices and events.

Why has the cultural landscape of 2000 – 2018 been dominated by art connected to the real? How have theatremakers used the real in their work, and what is their reason for doing so? This next section discusses 2000 – 2018, and argues that it is a significant period to commit substantial research to, because of the dominant affect of the precarity that has characterised Western life since the millennium.

Contextualising 2000 - 2018

Although we are yet to finish the second decade of this century, I contend that this work is necessary to undertake at this point. Indeed, I am not the only scholar to address such recent theatrical history, as Vicky Angelaki describes:

Under normal circumstances, it might have been premature to write a book on social and political theatre in twenty-first-century Britain as we are only now transitioning to the second half of the new century's second decade. But defining normal has become more of a challenge... (*Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis* 1)

Angelaki calls for a “conversation that problematizes some of the primary preoccupations for British society as captured in its theatre of the 2000s and 2010s” and this thesis continues that conversation, contending that the real is an important part of that discussion (1). Angelaki also provides a useful description of global life throughout this period naming a wide range of events that she claims have contributed to a general feeling of “crisis” (*Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis* 1). I contend that two important ‘crisis’ events of this period are the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001, which – crudely – can be said to have shaped the first decade of this millennium, and the 2007 – 8 financial crisis, which – again, crudely – can be said to have shaped the second.

The past two decades in England have been characterised as a period of privatization and deregulation, described as economic liberalism, or as late capitalism, or neoliberalism. I have chosen to use the term neoliberalism, as it is most commonly used to express the practices that claim to offer the individual ‘freedom’, “strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” with minimal state intervention (Harvey 2). David Graeber describes neoliberalism as “the new dispensation” and claims that it has become “the organizing principle of almost everything” (377). Chapter Two of this thesis outlines how the hegemony

of neoliberalism has produced widespread precarity and I will particularly turn to the later work of Judith Butler, and Lauren Berlant's theory of 'cruel optimism' to explore this. Butler argues 9/11 expanded feelings of precarity through intensifying personal feelings of vulnerability to the Other, and Berlant's theory addresses the ongoing precarity of the present moment. This chapter will also suggest the financial crash destabilised accepted narratives of stability, leading to increased precarity.

It is important to note, and this will be threaded throughout this thesis, that 2000 – 2018 should not be taken as limiting cut off points for discussion. Whilst I am primarily interested in the post-9/11 and post-recession theatrical response, the year 2000 is not where the concerns of the practitioners under study began. The following chapters highlight theatrical and artistic developments before this time that are relevant to their practice. Further, the practitioners are still producing work so this thesis is not an exhaustive study of this developing area, and my conclusion will look ahead to the future implications of my research.

Theatre of the real: a shift in focus

My aim in this thesis is to contribute towards thought and research that concerns the real in contemporary theatre. More specifically, I am interested in how *what comes to be seen* as the 'real' is dramatically produced. How do theatremakers throughout 2000 – 2018 dramatically produce what is understood as the real on stage, and what is the reason for its wide proliferation in contemporary work?⁴

My initial interest in theatre of the real was piqued by the pervasiveness of the term in relation to theatre, and the popularity of performances that present and explore reality, which has been well documented and is outlined throughout this thesis.⁵ I intend to address a gap that exists in theatre scholarship by analysing the relationship between theatre of the real and precarity, and its impact on the dramaturgical practices, content and structure of theatre of the

⁴ These questions were clarified by reading Una Chaudhuri's *The Stage Lives of Animals: Zooësis and Performance* (2017). Chaudhuri explains she coined the neologism 'zooësis': "[z]ooësis (from the Greek *zoion* = animal) to refer to the ways the animal is put into discourse: constructed, represented, understood and misunderstood" (5). Chaudhuri argues it is our own self-constructed *relationship* we have created to animals which is problematic (e.g. bestowing arbitrary symbolism on them). Chaudhuri's concept appeals to my research questions because I am less concerned with *what* the 'real' is, and more interested in understanding *how* the 'real' is used ideologically in theatre. The ubiquity of the 'real' in theatrical discourse is a marker that this requires further probing.

⁵ For further evidence of the rise in theatre of the real and its popularity see: Forsyth and Megson, *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (1), Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (5), David Lane, *Contemporary British Drama* (59), Tom Cantrell, *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (1), Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now* (3), and Ursula Canton's *Biographical Theatre* (1).

real work made during this time. What is the connection between theatre of the real and precarity? I will show that precarity underpins contemporary theatre of the real productions in both content and form. In considering the reason for the proliferation of theatre of the real, I contend that, as the affect of precarity has been felt more acutely, practitioners have turned more and more to theatre of the real as a way to attempt to analyse and explain the societal shifts. As Martin writes, contemporary “documentary theatre represents a struggle to shape and remember the most transitory history – the complex ways in which men and women think about the events that shape the landscapes of their lives” (*Dramaturgy...* 17). In times of increased fear and precarity, there is a desire to explain and rationalise what is happening, and theatre is one artistic vessel for these questions. This thesis will demonstrate that the practitioners I study respond to contemporary precarity through creating plays and performance that highlight the instability of reality.

Earlier examples of theatre of the real sought to provide as accurate a replication of real life and pre-recorded interviews as possible, in order to adequately capture the seriousness of what these plays often detailed. Their aim was, as Carol Martin suggests, “to ‘get real’, to access ‘the real thing’” (*Theatre of the Real* 4). For example, the director Nicolas Kent argues the “strength of verbatim is that it’s absolutely truthful, it’s exactly what someone said [...] my attempt, in using verbatim, is always to get as near to the truth as you can” (Kent in Hammond and Steward 152). For practitioners such as Kent, the focus is clear: to obtain the ‘real’, to provide “truth” for an audience. It was considered that audiences specifically sought out theatre as a place to become educated about important topics, often because of distrust in journalism. Michael Billington cites verbatim theatre as a “reaction against the loaded nature of public debate in Britain today” which is “undermined by proprietorial bias” in newspapers (*The Tricycle Collected Tribunal Plays* 2) and Mary Luckhurst claims that the rise in verbatim theatre productions “seem to be bound up with widespread suspicion of governments and their ‘spin’ merchants, a distrust of the media and a desire to uncover stories which may be being suppressed” (in Holdsworth and Luckhurst 200). These plays often tackled serious topics, usually in the wake of a traumatic incident, or as a response to societal frustration with how the government, police and media were responding to situations. For example, David Lane suggests that the “failures of the media to faithfully report events without manipulating evidence, and the repeated failures of hallowed institutions – the police, the army and the government – to conduct themselves with integrity were a significant contributing factor” to the rise of verbatim theatre (61).

I argue that since 2000, there has been a gradual shift in how theatre of the real operates. The central dramaturgical desire is no longer for legitimacy and to ‘get real’, but to highlight and explore the impossibility and ambiguity of “the real thing”. It is not *what* the real is that matters so much to practitioners, but *how* it functions within theatre. The existence of this shift has been articulated by Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford as “Reality Theatre productions that can be termed postdramatic”. They suggest these types of theatre “create porous and ambivalent worlds where real-life people, stories and places invade and are invaded by the frame of the stage”, analysing examples which encourage “destabilisation of a sense of authentic and graspable subjects, texts and communicative situations” (in Carroll et al. 148).

I argue this shift in theatre of the real is discernible through my observation that plays that explore or stage the real operate in two distinct ways: the ‘intradiegetic real’ and the ‘extradiegetic real’, which I extrapolate in Chapter One. In Chapter One I also introduce some of the innovative ways in which contemporary theatre deploys the real, through three indexical traces of the real in performance. These three traces are the archive, presence, and technology. I show how all these traces work dramaturgically together, forming a ‘reality braid’ that constructs the real on stage. This ‘reality braid’ is like a Borromean knot, Jacques Lacan’s frequently used metaphor of three interlinked circles which are connected together: if one of the links is removed, then the knot becomes disconnected.

How do practitioners use the indexical traces in order to create the affect of the real for audience members? I contend that this is achieved in performance through acts of *substitution*, the act of replacing one idea, object, or person, with another idea, object or person. The act of substitution reveals the instability of reality because, as an action, substitution points towards precarity: the precarious identity of one thing is replaced by another. These substitutions therefore instantiate the shift that theatre of the real has made from one that is ontologically secure in its presentation of the real, to one that performs the precarity of reality that is affectively felt in society. This shift can be witnessed in a span of exciting recent contemporary theatre work that is best evidenced and explored by analysing three contrasting case studies: Tim Crouch, Alecky Blythe, and Kim Noble.

The case studies

I offer here a brief introduction to the three practitioners studied –Tim Crouch, Alecky Blythe, and Kim Noble – in order to lay the foundations for the later chapters. My focus is on

productions of Crouch's *An Oak Tree* (National Theatre, 2015), Blythe's *Little Revolution* (Almeida Theatre, 2014), and Kim Noble's *You're Not Alone* (Soho Theatre and touring, 2015-16). These three artists may appear an unusual combination: Crouch is one of England's leading experimental playwrights, Blythe writes realist verbatim drama, and Noble creates autobiographical comedic performance pieces. Yet, I contend that placing these diverse artists alongside each other allows for a tracing of patterns between markedly different theatrical genres and highlights the range of performance work that is currently concerned with the real because each use the dramaturgical 'reality braid' of archive, presence and technology. This thesis demonstrates that, as a response to precarity, each evidence the shift in focus from a desire to 'get real', to instead exploring the impossibility and ambiguity of 'the real thing', through the dramaturgically instantiated logic of substitution.

It is important to note that the productions I analyse took place between 2014 – 2016, the years following the 2007 – 8 financial crash in which the effects of the 'age of austerity' were becoming apparent. However, Crouch's *An Oak Tree* was created in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It premiered at the Traverse Theatre at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2005 and then ran in New York City in 2006 – 2007, before opening at the Soho Theatre in London in early 2007. Therefore, it is an outlier from Blythe and Noble's work as it was made in the period prior to the 2007 – 8 financial crash. However, the piece anticipates the full effects of this period, which are investigated in *Little Revolution* and *You're Not Alone*.

As I evince, *An Oak Tree* is concerned with exploring existential precarity, which is reflective of the insecurity of the period following 9/11 when the play was written, as I discuss in Chapter Two. Blythe and Noble's work not only exemplifies existential precarity, but also societal precarity, which is reflective of the period of the age of austerity, as Chapter Two also explores. For this reason, I look at the case studies in chronological order in order to reflect the move from theatre that explores existential precarity, to theatre that explores both existential and societal precarity. I take Crouch's *An Oak Tree* as my first case study, followed by Blythe's *Little Revolution*, and finally Noble's *You're Not Alone*. As I will demonstrate, Crouch's play shares the dramaturgical strategies of the subsequent work produced by Blythe and Noble, which I identify as the archive, presence and technology. Although Crouch's work is not taken directly from documentary or verbatim sources, I contend that his work is connected to a wider cultural anxiety about the real, which the proliferation of documentary plays also demonstrates. It is pertinent to note that the revival of *An Oak Tree* occurred in 2015 at the NT, the year after the theatre had produced three theatre of the real plays running simultaneously, as I previously indicated.

Tim Crouch is an award-winning Brighton-based theatremaker who performs, directs and writes plays for adults and children. Inspired by conceptual art practices, Crouch is known for his formal experimentation and interest in the metaphorical abstract: Caridad Svich describes him as “one of the most exciting experimental theatre-makers working in the English-language” (205) and Dan Rebellato comments “Crouch is acclaimed for his avant-garde experimentations” (*Coup de Théâtre* 91). Crouch began his career in the 1980s as an actor, and became a writer after his first play – a solo piece titled *My Arm* (2003) – achieved critical success (Rebellato ‘Tim Crouch’ 126). Crouch’s plays are often seen as experimental, particularly because of their formal innovations: for example, in *My Arm* “he asks the audience to provide his props” and uses these objects “to illustrate the story and stand in for other characters and objects from the story” (Rebellato ‘Tim Crouch’ 129). As Crouch’s work is fictional and not based on real life, or testimony, his work may seem an outlier against Blythe and Noble. However, I demonstrate that he not only shares dramaturgical indexical traces of the real with the other case studies, but is also fascinated with exploring and refiguring the real in content and form and, as such, his work should be included within the theatre of the real categorisation. *An Oak Tree* (2005) was inspired by the visual artist Michael Craig Martin’s 1973 artwork ‘An Oak Tree’. It uses a unique framing device to unfold its narrative concerns – every night the second member of the cast (alongside Crouch) is a different actor who has never read the script before.

There is a wide range of scholarship that deals with Crouch’s plays. In *Modern British Playwriting 2000 – 2009: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*, Rebellato analyses *My Arm*, *An Oak Tree* and *The Author* and whilst his comprehensive study is extremely useful – particularly on the plays in performance and the affect they have on their audience – the analysis is a little truncated for the general reader of this text. Helen Freshwater explains the way that Crouch’s plays engage audiences and cites *The Author* as one that “shows its audiences that not all experiences of participation are positive” (409), and across the following chapters I consider the politics of participation. Seda Ilter, Cristina Delgado-Garcia and Catherine Love have all responded to Crouch’s work, particularly in terms of his association with visual art, and the politics of his plays. However, and surprisingly, despite drawing comparisons between Crouch’s work and conceptual art movements, none of these scholars consider the work of Michael Craig-Martin in detail. Whilst Craig-Martin’s ‘An Oak Tree’ is often visually described by scholars, there is a lack of rigorous insight into the philosophy and techniques of Craig-Martin’s practice, and I have sought to redress this omission.

Alecky Blythe is a London-based verbatim playwright who founded the Recorded Delivery company in 2003. Blythe named the company after the particular verbatim technique that she employs in her work: real-life recorded interviews are edited and fed to actors via earphones during rehearsals and performance, with the intention that actors then perfectly mimic what they hear. Blythe is a useful case study for this thesis because – as previously mentioned – verbatim theatre is one of the most popular forms of theatre of the real in England.⁶ *Little Revolution* (2014), the key production of Blythe’s I will analyse, is emblematic of her recorded delivery technique. A central feature of the original 2014 production at the Almeida Theatre is that Blythe features in the cast, playing herself. Indeed, a shared strategy of each practitioner is that they perform in each of my case study productions, and this shall be analysed at greater length in each chapter.

As the recorded delivery technique is an unusual performance experience for actors to undertake, there is considerable scholarship on this aspect of Blythe’s practice. Tom Cantrell’s *Acting in Documentary Theatre* and Lib Taylor’s article ‘Voice, Body and the Transmission of the Real in Documentary Theatre’ (2013), and an interview she conducted with Blythe in 2011, assess the role of the actor. Such work introduces questions of voice and the real, but its focus on the actor leaves slightly less room to discuss the affect generated by her work for an audience, which is where my thesis steps in. *Little Revolution* has attracted considerable critical attention, possibly because its focus is on the 2011 riots, which opens up considerations of politics and race. Cyrielle Garson has written about this production and of particular note is her eloquent observation that *Little Revolution* “is as interested in dramatising the constructed nature of the piece itself” (‘Does Verbatim theatre...’ 215). Whilst I acknowledge this useful reading, my thesis focuses on the affect of the play as an example of, what I term, ‘post-traumatic kitsch theatre’.

My third case study is the performance and video artist Kim Noble, who is based in South East London. Of the three practitioners, Noble is the least renowned and his oeuvre is significantly smaller than that of Blythe or Crouch. However, in the years he has been producing work, Noble has established himself as one of the most exciting and controversial multi-disciplinary performance artists working in the UK, reflected in accolades received for his work. The case study for this thesis is *You’re Not Alone* (first performed 2014), a solo autobiographical performance piece that fuses video footage, sound recordings, direct

⁶ For example: David Lane describes the “rapid growth of verbatim” (59), Hammond and Steward claim verbatim theatre “is thriving” (11) and Michael Billington describes the “huge public appetite for what we now call Verbatim Theatre” (*The Tricycle Collected Tribunal Plays* 1).

address, comedy, and audience participation. Noble performs the piece himself and the show explores his attempt to find meaning and connection with strangers he meets. As an autobiographical piece, Noble's work falls within Martin's theatre of the real category, and his work shares the same indexical traces of the real as Blythe and Crouch's.

Noble's production output is likely to grow in future years, yet there is little scholarship that investigates his work. The main research on Noble draws attention to the theme of mental health, a strong focus of his performances, as Chapter Five will evince. However, this thesis is concerned with his instantiation of the real and the affective structure of his work for an audience. In Chapter Five I address the slim scholarship that exists on Noble, and part of the work of this thesis is to remedy this dearth of material. In Chapter Five I also look at scholarship that relates to autobiographical performance, drawing on the research Deirdre Heddon has undertaken in this area.

Methodology

I use two principal research methods in my analysis of the three case study practitioners. Firstly, the research takes a text-based approach and uses close textual analysis to uncover textual meaning and shared dramaturgical strategies. Secondly, the research takes a performance-based approach and draws from my personal experience as an audience member during these productions. I therefore take texts into consideration, but contend they cannot be evaluated without also considering the performative, as the two combined and compared offer the most complete and complex impression of the theatrical event. To complement and add to these two predominant strategies of research I also engage in other methodological approaches. In my work on Tim Crouch I have adopted an ethnographical approach and observed rehearsals. In my work on Alecky Blythe, I have consulted archives and made use of archival recordings and archival documentation from the National Theatre Archives, and the Almeida Theatre.

Close text analysis of the plays is central to my research because published play texts are what remains and can be analysed once a live performance is over. The published plays of Tim Crouch and Alecky Blythe enable me to address my research questions, not only through providing a document of the original performance, but also through indicating how practitioners frame and market the future life of their work following an initial production run. The method of close text analysis is useful in allowing analysis of the minutiae of scripts that will not be apparent through just watching a play – for example, noticing the particular

choice of word, or punctuation in certain parts of the text. The difficulty of analysing these texts is that there is always a gap between the text on the page and how it originally appeared in the live performance. Peggy Phelan suggests that text and performance are two entirely separate entities: “[p]erformance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, [or] documented” (146). There is developing research about the complex nature of performance and the theatre text, but it is generally considered that the text can be used as a record of the original performance. The text is the central document that remains from the liminal experience of theatre – a ‘trace’ of the original live performance.

The other key methodological approach is performance-based: I have seen each of the productions in performance, sometimes several times and some productions I saw at different venues across the UK. The importance this thesis gives to analysis of live production is in part a response to Phelan’s anxiety about the impermanence of performance. As Philip Auslander states, “the common assumption is that the live event is “real” and that mediatised events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real” (3). Through performance analysis, I am able to draw on my role as an audience member to analyse the live event and describe the inconsistencies and irregularities of performance that may not be explicit in the published text of a production. This is crucial as sometimes the printed version differs from the live performance and often its final incarnation does not include pre-show or post-show action that can be an important aspect of the audience’s experience. Due to last minute changes in rehearsal or during the production run, the text does not always accurately describe the physical action, stage design or proxemics of the production as accurately as when the text becomes performance. Further, because I watched each of these productions, I am able to draw on my own personal affective response, yet my experience should not be taken as representative for all audience members. A performance-centred approach ensures that I take note of miniscule changes in performance on different nights of the run, the audience reception, and how productions alter according to varying venue requirements. My observations of audience response are incorporated into my analysis, as a key attribute of some theatre of the real is the tendency for productions to require their audience to be slightly more engaged, even a co-creator of the work. Attending the productions ensured I received an embodied experience of the different performative demands that each of the case studies employs. To complement this, I also make use of reviews and blogposts about the productions to offer a clear understanding of the reception of these pieces of work. This performance-centred method enables me to meet the aims of the thesis by offering an invaluable insight

into the central visual and aesthetic manifestations of the instances of theatre practice discussed.

Another methodological approach important to this research project is the use of archival documentation, which allows me to extend the scope of my research to other types of text integral to the case studies. The Almeida Theatre's archive has provided me the opportunity to look at the prompt copy, rehearsal notes, production photographs, and other documentation pertaining to *Little Revolution*. These stage management texts and visual texts usefully offer distinct versions of the live performance that can be revisited. The archive for *Little Revolution* has proved particularly illuminating in enabling me to meet the aims of this research project because it offers a clear understanding of the uniqueness of rehearsal and research particular to producing a recorded delivery verbatim play. Although the material in this archive is in the public domain, it is unpublished and provides a useful understanding of how the creative team rehearsed this particular play. Secondly, another central part of the analysis is the complementary texts that surround the performances, including programmes, reviews, trailers, interviews with the practitioners and other archival documentation such as rehearsal reports. These peripheral texts surrounding the case studies give some indication of the initial critical and audience reception of the productions, whilst also suggesting how the productions were originally marketed and framed by the producing theatres. In the National Theatre's archive, there is a taped version of a performance of Crouch's *An Oak Tree* and Blythe's *London Road*, along with rehearsal documentation and production photographs. Further texts that form part of my research are the existing scholarly material on each of these practitioners and this existing material is analysed in their corresponding chapters.

Of particular use are different editions of texts, such as the 2015 revised and updated edition of *An Oak Tree*, published by Oberon Books. The updates in the latest edition allow me to assess small but significant changes in Crouch's approach to the play. Although, in terms of researching Noble, a central difficulty is that no text is published of his performances and my research therefore relies on notes taken during performances. The implications of this methodological issue relate back to Peggy Phelan's insistence that performance "cannot be saved", and that to "to attempt to write about the undocumentable event of performance is to invoke the rules of the written document and thereby alter the event itself" (146, 148). The impermanence of performance is why it is important for me to draw on several different methodological approaches, in order to not favour performance over text, or vice-versa, but rather to adopt a broad appreciation of the many ways that performance is received, coded and understood.

My documentation of time spent as an observer in the rehearsal room with Tim Crouch offers an ethnographic approach to the research. My analysis will include a few observations made during the time I spent in rehearsals for the updated production of *Adler and Gibb* between 7 – 22 July 2016. Other work on Crouch has tended to focus on production and textual analysis, rather than rehearsal processes.⁷ However, my key case study is Crouch's *An Oak Tree* and as I did not spend time in Blythe or Noble's rehearsal room the findings from this time do not serve to act as a comparative study of rehearsal processes, but they do deepen understanding of Crouch's 'dematerialised theatre' practice.

Postmodernism and Postdramatic Theatre

Hans-Thies Lehmann's groundbreaking *Postdramatic Theatre* was published in 1999 (English edition 2006). He describes a "new theatre": 'postdramatic theatre' "is to a large extent a 'no longer dramatic' theatre" (17) because dramatic theatre "is subordinated to the primacy of the text" (21). Lehmann argues that "[i]n different ways, this core category of drama is pushed back in postdramatic theatre – in degrees ranging from an 'almost still dramatic' theatre to a form where not even the rudiments of fictive processes can be found any more" (69) and that postdramatic theatre is no longer concerned with constructing "a *fictive cosmos*" – a total illusory world on stage (22). He names Robert Wilson, Jan Fabre, Heiner Goebbels, Pina Bausch, Bobby Baker and DV8 Physical Theatre as examples of postdramatic practitioners (23 – 34).

Lehmann's work is significant for discussions of contemporary theatre, particularly those concerning presence (he writes "[p]ostdramatic theatre is a *theatre of the present*" (143)), the real, and technology, key concerns of this thesis. Indeed, Lehmann pays particular attention to an analysis of theatre and the real, writing that "postdramatic theatre means: theatre of the real" because it is concerned with "permanently switching, not between form and content, but between 'real' contiguity (connection with reality) and 'staged' construct" (103). My case studies (especially Noble) explore the real in this way, but in this thesis, rather than 'postdramatic', I prefer to use the framing terms of 'intradiegetic real' and 'extradiegetic real', as Chapter One details. Further, as opposed to a rejection and refusal of the dramatic,

⁷ See the collection of essays and interviews that respond to Crouch's work in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24.1 (2011); see also Stephen Bottoms, "Authorizing the Audience: The Conceptual Drama of Tim Crouch", *Performance Research*, 14.1 (2009), pp. 65-76; Emilie Morin, "'Look Again': Indeterminacy and Contemporary British Drama", *New Theatre Quarterly*, 27.1 (2011), pp. 71-85; Helen Freshwater, "Children and the Limits of Representation in the Work of Crouch", in Vicky Angelaki (ed.), *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 167-188; Dan Rebellato, "Tim Crouch", in Dan Rebellato (ed.), *Modern British Playwriting 2000 – 2009* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 125-144.

each of my case study practitioners are interested in story and narrative. It therefore feels a disservice to analyse their work through the postdramatic.

Despite Lehmann's interest in these matters, this thesis does not use postmodernism or postdramatic theatre as a springboard. This is also because Lehmann's concern is for "roughly the 1970s to the 1990s" when "the term postmodern theatre [became] established", whilst my case studies start from the year 2005 (25). I would contend that whilst they certainly all owe an aesthetic debt to the shift towards postdramatic theatre, by the twenty-first century, Lehmann's arguments do not apply in quite the same way because the experience of capitalism (on which ideas about postmodernism are founded) is so different in the period that I am looking at – one beyond postmodernism and the postdramatic. As Jeffrey T. Nealon argues in *Post-Postmodernism*, "capitalism itself is the thing that's intensified most radically since Jameson began doing his work on postmodernism" (x) and "[o]n an affective level of everyday life in the US, it's pretty clear that whatever happened culturally and economically in the 1980s and '90s, we're living in a different period" (11). This different period requires a different theoretical approach to Lehmann's, and I am more interested in using contemporary philosophers and theorists who are interested in precarity, neoliberalism and austerity which has been the dominant experience of the twenty-first century, rather than using Lehmann as a lens through which to analyse my case studies.

My position is partly because I share Elinor Fuchs' dissatisfaction with Lehmann's text for concentrating on aesthetic developments, as opposed to politics. Brandon Woolf argues that "Lehmann's volume is an ambitious attempt to come to terms with the aesthetic developments in American and European theatre" (32) and describes Fuchs' complaint in her review of his book that he engages with aesthetics rather than social and political theory (32). Indeed, the most useful work regarding postdramatic theatre that has been undertaken in relation to my thesis has been by Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford who examine the politics of some examples of reality theatre which they designate as postdramatic "because they create the porous and ambivalent worlds where real-life people and places invade and are invaded by the frame of the stage" (148). In their argument they delineate how a "destabilisation of a sense of authentic and graspable subjects, texts and communicative situations" can result in a "productive insecurity" which "can be used to unfix stable and possibly oppressive perceptions of the stable and the unfamiliar" (148). Whilst Garde and Mumford's position shares much similarity with the ideas I develop in this thesis, I still would not label my case studies as postdramatic.

Terminology: the real – a term that is “inadequate yet necessary”

In this thesis, I develop specific terminology, which requires explanation. This is not intended to establish a prescriptive definition of concepts, but to offer guidelines to my own use of them.

Throughout this thesis I do not place ‘real’, ‘the real’, ‘reality’ or ‘theatre of the real’ in quotation marks. This follows the lead of Carol Martin, who argues that,

‘Real’ in quotation marks insinuates that the real is not real. Real (without quotation marks) insinuates that the real is real. Since much of my discussion is about the real’s ambiguity, I have elected not to use quotation marks. (178)

Martin’s deduction, she explains, stems from Janelle Reinelt’s citing of Stella Bruzzi when discussing “the awareness of spectators about the status of reality” (9). Reinelt cites Bruzzi’s statement that “[t]he Spectator is not in need of signposts and inverted commas to understand that a documentary is a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other” which Martin takes to be implicitly implying that quotation marks need not accompany the word ‘real’ (Bruzzi in Martin 9). I am not suggesting that the real is self-explanatory, rather that my case studies each point towards the real through their different dramaturgies of process. To use quotation marks when referring to ‘the real’ would, I argue, suggest a concern with researching the ambiguous nature of the real. This is not my concern – in this thesis I take the ambiguous nature of the real as a given, not something requiring investigation. To not use quotation marks when referring to the real elides this lengthy debate and works from the presumption that the analysis at hand is one step advanced from any ontological concerns. Whilst not using quotation marks when referring to the real could be seen as an oppressive gesture that marks the real as defined rather than allowing for its multivalent properties, I would rather ease clarity and flow. Further, I stress that my thesis is not concerned with what the real is (ontologically), but rather how the real has been ingrained in discourse and used in distinctive dramaturgical ways.

Many theorists have already placed a question mark over the real. Shields comments that “[r]eality, as Nabakov never got tired of reminding us, is the one word that is meaningless without quotation marks” (3-4). What Shields playfully suggests is that quotation marks highlight the many different conceptions of reality and its unending philosophical discourse. It is its imperceptibility that gives it meaning. Indeed, following Derrida, it is tempting to place ‘the real’ “sous rature” (under erasure) (Derrida in Spivak xiv). Derrida’s

use of “sous rature” stems from Martin Heidegger’s crossing out of the word “Being” in *The Question of Being*: “[a] thoughtful glance ahead into this realm of ‘Being’ can only write it as ~~Being~~” (Heidegger in Spivak xv). The crossing out liberates the term and allows it to both ‘be’ and ‘not be’ simultaneously: the word is both “*inadequate yet necessary*” (Sarup 33). It seems to me that there is no need for citation marks, or to cross out the real – this should be implicit. Overuse of citation marks, or a line through the word ‘real’ every time it is mentioned would stilt the reader’s flow. Further, they would distract from the core focus of this thesis, which is not a debate as to whether or not the real exists. The slipperiness of the concept is inherent in its term and any finalised meaning is always deferred. Instead of opening up questions of ontology through use of citation marks, I focus on how what has come to be understood as the real functions in theatre and explore how dramaturgical processes construct the real in performance.

A key descriptive term in relation to the real that I use in this thesis is ‘theatre of the real’, following Carol Martin. Chapter One explains Martin’s development of the term, and its usage, as well as my own argument that the term is now rather restrictive. In this way, part of the work of this thesis is to ‘make precarious’ the term ‘theatre of the real’ and call for a widening of the term to include fictional plays such as Tim Crouch’s *An Oak Tree* which, although it does not draw directly from real life, is primarily concerned with exploring the idea of the real. Considering this, it may be more fitting to use the term ‘theatre *about* the real’, rather than ‘theatre *of* the real’, thus avoiding the assumption that all the plays in this category are created ‘out of’ real events. However, whilst not eschewing its problematics, I use the term ‘theatre of a real’ throughout this thesis because it is the most readily available and recognisable term used by scholars to ‘frame’ analysis in this broad field. Martin argues that the phrase ‘documentary theatre’ “fails us. It is inadequate. Yet at present it is the best phrase available” (‘Bodies of Evidence’ 13): this can be applied to my use of the term ‘theatre of the real’ - it is both problematic and useful.

Affect

Affect is referred to throughout this thesis, and so I introduce it here. Affect theory is a growing field in the Social Sciences and Humanities that focuses on nonlinguistic drives. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth indicate that “interest and intrigue regarding affect and theories of affect came in 1995” with the publication of essays by Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank, and Brian Massumi (5). However, a precise definition of affect is hard to

achieve. Gregg and Seigworth write that there “is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be” (3), Sara Ahmed writes that “I do not assume there is something called affect that stands apart or has autonomy, as if it corresponds to an object in the world, or even that there is something called affect that can be shared as an object of study” (30), and Marissia Fragkou explains that “the term ‘affect’ is notoriously slippery and is often used interchangeably with emotion and feeling” (9). Keeping in mind the ‘slipperiness’ of affect, I consider here the definitions that align most with my understanding of it.

Erin Hurley’s work on theatre and feeling draws attention to affect’s connection to the body, stating that it “means ‘feeling associated with action’. Our blood rushes faster, our mirror neurons spike new synaptic activity throughout our bodies, adrenalin courses throughout the system” (xii). This describes affect in terms of a visceral feeling, which Hurley suggests are “autonomic reactions, such as sexual arousal or sweating; thus, affects are sets of muscular or glandular responses [...] responses we cannot consciously control” (13). Hurley indicates that emotion is different to affect because it is a process that “names our sensate, bodily experience in a way that organises it and makes it legible to ourselves” (23), as opposed to being an unconscious response.

Other scholars concur with Hurley that affect is related to bodily forces. Seigworth and Gregg explain it as “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion” (1); Anna Gibbs claims it is “intricately involved in the human autonomic system and engaging an energetic dimension that impels or inhibits the body’s capacity for action” (188), and Ben Highmore distinguishes it as “on the borders of the material and immaterial, the physical and metaphysical” (120). Gabriel Winant usefully indicates affect’s potential for the political, when he describes it as “a more generalized way of talking about the connection between feelings and power” (112). Winant states that affect relates to “a particular emotion regarding a particular object”, and is concerned with what objects *do*: “[a]ffects reverse the subject-object relationship of emotions: we are their objects, rather than their origins” (Winant 112). By this, Winant means that affect relates to a lack of emotional control in response to something: something is *done to us*, not the other way around.

Several scholars highlight how affect is a concept that is predicated on relationality. Fragkou asserts that “affect specifically refers to the intersections of the physiological, psychological and material experiences of relationality” (9); Seigworth and Gregg state that affect “is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of

relation” (1), and Megan Watkins describes it as “importantly a relational phenomenon” (270). Theatre is intimately connected to affect because it is a space of proximity and relationality – both physically, and emotionally. Ahmed argues that when thinking about affect it is useful to “begin with the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near” (30). A theatre audience experiences a ‘nearness’ to the stage and performers – they sit, or stand in close spatial proximity to them. However, they also are proximate to the stories and emotions that are portrayed and lived out on stage. As Hurley indicates, “theatre is an imitation that uses the materials of the life-world to create its symbolic world” (33).

The concept of affect is therefore useful to me in this thesis because I am concerned with the relation between the theatre of the real and precarity, and the ways this is experienced by audiences who sit in relation to the stage both physically and emotionally. I am interested in how theatre stages the affective symptoms of precarity and the real – how precarity and the real *impact upon* an audience in a physiological and emotional way. In order to analyse this I draw on being an audience member at each of the productions (and indeed, a participant in *You’re Not Alone*); I draw on reviews and blogs that document audience response, and I pay attention to particular performative acts that produce affective responses such as the use of nudity, and material objects. In order to trace affect in performances I have been witness to I use these methods to explain how theatre stages the affective symptoms of precarity, and my case study chapters explore this in detail. In the following chapters I focus on the archive, presence and technology which are affect-producing dramaturgical processes. I reveal how these processes play a role in staging affective responses to precarity and I contend that practitioners explore relational affect through acts of *substitution* which reveal the instability of reality through replacing the precarious identity of one thing with another. In this way, theatre affectively produces for an audience the precarity of reality experienced in society.

‘English’ theatre, not ‘British’ theatre

Although this thesis references a wide range of contemporary British and international theatre, its three case studies are English theatre practitioners and it is important to make the distinction that I am writing about ‘English’ theatre, as opposed to ‘British’ theatre. This observation is important for two reasons. Firstly, there is an unhelpful and inattentive trend in contemporary theatre scholarship to conflate ‘English’ and ‘British’, rather than

acknowledging the subtle differences between the two. For instance, in academic publishing it is relatively common to find books labelled as examining ‘British’ theatre when they actually only touch upon theatre made in England by English practitioners. Examples include Vicky Angelaki’s recent *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain* (2017), Robert Gordon, Olaf Jubin and Millie Taylor’s *British Musical Theatre Since 1950* (2016) and Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody’s *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain* (2006). This omission and these examples were highlighted to me by Trish Reid, who comments that “Scottish people (and I assume Welsh and Northern Irish people) get irritated when the term British is used to describe things that are really just English” (email correspondence). The problematic nature of labeling theatre either as ‘British’ or as ‘English’ is noted by others. Luckhurst clearly describes the trouble with this in her introduction to *A Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880-2005*. She states that “[t]he idea that certain playwrights and certain plays might be representative of various cultures and various communities is troubling”, and notes that “[a] major difficulty for the idea of English drama is that it has been consumed by the notion of British drama, just as ‘England’ has been consumed by the idea of ‘Britain’” (Luckhurst 1). Similarly, Sierz reflects on the concept of “British theatre” and suggests it is “problematic”. He claims that this is “not least because most playwrights are influenced by ideas and events from all over the world”. For Sierz, this growing globalised world means that “the idea of Britishness is constantly being questioned, contested and qualified, whether implicitly or explicitly, by work from abroad” (*Rewriting* 4).

In recognising that the distinction between English and British drama is problematic, and the possibility for the two to become blurred, I am not demanding that crude categories be drawn which separates English theatre, from Welsh, Scottish, or Northern Irish theatre. Theatre made in one place will likely share commonality with theatre made in another place and there will be multiple dualities at play in both ‘types’ – it would be impossible, and even grotesquely tokenistic, to rigidly categorise theatre in this way. As a national and cultural identity is something hybrid that is continually in flux, an in depth explanation of the sociological theories that distinguish between British and English identity is beyond the remit of this thesis. However, broadly, the English identity that I highlight across some of the work includes (but is not limited to): ‘stiff upper lip’ in the face of tragedy, nostalgic desire for community, a fondness for kitsch, suspicion of the Other, and the flippant juxtaposition of the banal and the extreme. Again, this is not to say that the Northern Irish, Welsh and Scottish do not possess these characteristics, but I discuss these in terms of their English cultural significance.

Thesis Structure

This thesis contains five chapters which outline how contemporary English theatre uses the archive, presence, and technology as three indexical traces of the real in performance, in order to respond to contemporary precarity. The first chapter introduces the theoretical foundations of this research and analyses contemporary theatre's turn towards theatre of the real. I propose a renegotiation of Carol Martin's definition of "theatre of the real" because of my observation that plays that explore or stage the 'real' operate in two distinct ways: I term these two distinct roles: the 'intradiegetic real' and the 'extradiegetic real'. Further, I offer an exploration of the historical and philosophical definitions of the terms 'archive', 'presence' and 'technology'.

Chapter Two examines the political and economic context of the period 2000 – 2018 in order to explain how and why contemporary British theatre in the twenty-first century has engaged with precarity. I cite 9/11 and the War on Terror, and the 2007 – 8 financial crash and politics of austerity as examples, and explore various types of precarity: personal, societal, and economic. I compare the different versions of precarity theorised by Judith Butler and Lauren Berlant and frame the debate to follow by addressing the interconnected areas of neoliberalism, cruel optimism, utopia, and nostalgia.

In Chapters Three, Four and Five, I analyse each case study in turn, outlining the indexical traces of the real for each and how these function within the productions under review.

In Chapter Three, I analyse the conceptual theatre of the practitioner Tim Crouch and his collaborators, taking the National Theatre production of *An Oak Tree* (2015) as my central focus. By demonstrating that Crouch's work is fundamentally concerned with exploring and re-conceptualising reality, this chapter makes the case for his plays to be considered as an example of theatre of the real. I argue that 'presence' is important for Crouch, and show how it is supported by the interconnected traces of archive and technology. Through analysing the indexical traces of the real in Crouch's work, I demonstrate that his work is primarily concerned with staging the experience of precarity, both in content and form. In this instance, I understand precarity as defined by Judith Butler: precarity in the face of the Other, injury and death.

Chapter Four critically reflects on the impact and aesthetics of the verbatim theatre work of Alecky Blythe, looking at her play *Little Revolution* (2014). I introduce the

importance of voice to Blythe and explain how, for her, it appears voice is the route to the real. The chapter considers the political and aesthetic importance of vocal delivery in the discourse of documentary theatre. This chapter demonstrates that Blythe's work – and, verbatim theatre more broadly – is an example of cruel optimism, the type of precarity theorised by Lauren Berlant. By analysing Blythe's work through this lens, I argue that Blythe's plays highlight what I term 'post-traumatic kitsch syndrome': the English desire to revert to nostalgia and engage in kitsch activities during times of precarity.

In Chapter Five I analyse the autobiographical theatre of the performance artist Kim Noble, directing my focus on his 2015 show *You're Not Alone*, at the Soho Theatre. Through observing the way in which the archive, presence and technology operate in Noble's performance, I show how *You're Not Alone* centres on precarity, as understood by both Judith Butler and Lauren Berlant. This chapter demonstrates how, for Noble, technology is the key route to the real. I suggest that, in performance, Noble objects himself and plays with proximity in order to highlight the contested space of neoliberal proximity in the urban environment and the fantasy of the community dream.

The conclusion considers the implications of this research into theatre of the real and its indexical traces, in relation to precarity. I use this final moment to consider what the legacy of the work under consideration may be for future research in this area, and the cultural landscape of the following decades.

CHAPTER ONE

THEATRE OF THE REAL AND ITS INDEXICAL TRACES

The pursuit of an ever-elusive “real” leads to new objects of knowledge and new interpretations that reorganize reality.

– Joan W. Scott (87)

The index asserts nothing; it only says ‘There!’ It takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object, and there it stops.

– Charles Sanders Peirce (*The Essential Peirce* 226)

1.1 Introduction: from *what* to *how*

In 2006 the theatre scholar Carol Martin wrote “[n]o doubt the phrase ‘documentary theatre’ fails us. It is inadequate. Yet at present it is the best phrase available” (‘Bodies of Evidence’ 13). In 2010 she coined the most recent term used to describe this theatrical movement, “theatre of the real” (*Dramaturgy* 1). Martin explains theatre of the real is “also known as documentary theatre as well as docudrama, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, and theatre of fact” (1). She subsumes the well-known genre of “documentary theatre” within the all-encompassing “theatre of the real”. Indeed, Martin offers eight alternative names for “theatre of the real” which suggests either that “theatre of the real” is simply a portmanteau term which covers a wide collection of diverse work, or that it is a term so broad as to be unhelpful, or even meaningless. In this chapter, I introduce and critique Carol Martin’s influential work on “theatre of the real” (*Dramaturgy*... 1). The work of this thesis is not simply – as Martin does – to replace one unsatisfactory term with another. Rather, it is to challenge the concepts that appear to underlie this term widely adopted by practitioners, reviewers and scholars.

It is my contention that the term ‘theatre of the real’ lacks necessary nuance. (Perhaps this is hardly surprising since, from the beginning of philosophy in the West, there has been no philosophical or theoretical agreement on the nature of the real.) Therefore, the real has been absorbed into theatrical discourse and used, repeated and codified as if the meaning was

understood. My thesis aims to investigate how what comes to be understood as the real is dramatically produced. It is important to undertake this work for two reasons. First, theatre of the real has been popular throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century, and the reasons for its popularity call for further analysis. Second, the form has become increasingly hybrid (for example, merging verbatim text with invented text as seen in Tanika Gupta's *Gladiator Games* (2005), or setting verbatim material to music, as popularised by Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork's *London Road* (2011)). As a result, one overarching categorical term is no longer sufficient to describe the proliferation and extensive formal developments in these works.

It is also my contention that the prevalence of formal experimentation in theatre of the real productions indicates that the central dramaturgical desire of practitioners working in these areas has altered. A key focus of theatre of the real is no longer a concern "to 'get real', to access 'the real thing'", as Martin suggests (*Theatre of the Real* 4). Rather, the work that I analyse is interested in deconstructing precisely this. My thesis approaches this shift in focus: it is not a question of content, nor of art somehow 'getting closer' to a 'reality' by crossing an ontological gap. Instead, I argue that there are distinctive ways of indexing and pointing to the real in contemporary theatre (new 'reality effects', after Roland Barthes). It is now no longer *what* the real is that matters, but *how* it functions – the innovative ways in which contemporary theatre 'deploys' certain dramaturgical processes which come to be understood as the real.

For purposes of analysis, I suggest this deployment is shown through considering three indexical traces of the real in performance: the archive, technology and presence. This chapter introduces these notions and the discussion is deepened and applied in chapters relating to each case study. Analysis of these indexical traces and the ways in which they are instantiated in performance provides an understanding of what the wider relevance of this dramaturgical shift indicates. How might we account for these contemporaneous theatrical developments?

To unravel the way that the real is discursively mobilised, this chapter suggests that within contemporary theatre, the real operates in two distinct ways: there exists an 'intradiegetic real' which presents the real on stage, and an 'extradiegetic real' which performs the real. Each of these ways that the real operates offers a distinct aesthetic framework and performs different ideologies, as I will explain. To begin, it is necessary to further investigate the work of Martin and her clarification of 'theatre of the real'.

1.2 Carol Martin's "theatre of the real"

Carol Martin coined the term "theatre of the real" in *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, published in 2010 (1). This edited collection contains a diverse range of global theatre texts that exemplify "theatre of the real" alongside accompanying theoretical essays. Her introductory remarks recognise the field is rapidly expanding beyond "conservative documentary theatre" (1). She notes the existence of "an emerging theatre of the real that directly addresses the global condition of troubled epistemologies about truth, authenticity and reality" (1). Martin's *Theatre of the Real* (2013) develops foundations laid in *Dramaturgy...* and explores the "overlap and interplay between 'theatre' and 'reality,' the blurred boundary between the stage and the 'real' world". This monograph aims to research the

problems and possibilities of the ways theatre of the real seeks to 'get real,' to access 'the real thing,' to represent reality, and to be part of the circulation of ideas about our personal, social and political lives. (4)

In *Theatre of the Real* Martin offers performance analyses, weaving personal experiences alongside discussion of specific work from a wide variety of contexts. One of the aims of Martin's scholarship is to adjust the focus towards "one that includes a variety of forms and methods [...] and the development of different methodologies" (4). As noted, in *Dramaturgy...* Martin recognises the "emerging" new practices beginning to crystallise. In *Theatre of the Real*, Martin develops this claim and outlines that

While there may be no universal agreement on individual terms, there is an emerging consensus that theatre of the real includes documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre-of-fact, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, restored village performances, war and battle reenactments, and autobiographical theatre. (5)

Here, Martin suggests ten theatrical modes that can be characterised as theatre of the real. She argues that all "of these types of theatre claim a relationship to reality" and that the "phrase 'theatre of the real' identifies a wide range of theatre practices and styles that *recycle* reality" (5, my emphasis). The "wide range" of existing theatrical practice illustrates the impossibility of a singular definition of theatre of the real. However, her use of the term is clearly restricted to productions which foreground the understanding of the real in relation to material, factual and historical evidence, whether that is through staging previously spoken words, using

documentary transcripts, recreating historical and personal events, or using other similar methodologies that foreground the real in relation to everyday existence, rather than creating an imagined story. For Martin, it is the ‘recycling’ of reality which identifies work that can be considered theatre of the real and this includes practices such as documentary theatre, or autobiographical theatre: stories that *re-stage* the words and actions of real people.

Martin’s term has taken purchase and is now a recognised phrase in scholarly discourse; her work is critically celebrated, and its influence noted by many. Liz Tomlin recognises that Martin’s *Theatre of the Real* “broadens what we might understand as theatre of the real” (280-281) and considers it an important contribution to scholarship:

The importance of this study lies in its broadening of our conception of a theatre of the real, its capacity to reach beyond an analysis of such theatre practice on its own terms to ask critical and topical questions concerning the nature of the real itself, and its disclosing of how diverse structures of performance and narrative enable us to read, conceptualize, and invoke reality in different ways. (“Theatre of the Real by Carol Martin (review).” 282)

It is not only reviews of Martin’s work, such as Tomlin’s, that stress its influential nature, but also reviews of work in a similar field. Ali-Reza Mirsajadi’s review of *Theatre of Real People: Diverse Encounters at Berlin’s Hebbel am Ufer and Beyond* (2016) highlights Martin’s influence: “[f]ollowing the lead of Carol Martin’s *Theatre of the Real* (2012), Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford’s new book aims to change the conversation” (259). In her review of both *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (2009) and *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (2010), Caroline Wake notes Martin’s foundational work on the discourse of theatre and reality:

The figure of Martin looms large [...] not only because she is an author in the former and the editor of the latter, but also because her edited issue of TDR (2006) is the foundation upon which both books are built. (1)

Indeed, in the preface to the paperback edition of *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (2009), Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson note the importance of Martin’s guest edition on documentary theatre in *The Drama Review* and the subsequent publication of *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (2010) which they describe as “an important volume that gathers together articles, commentaries from practitioners and performance texts from around the world” (xiv). Martin’s work in this area has been so influential that it is conspicuous in its absence. For example, in his review of Marvin Carlson’s *Shattering*

Hamlet's Mirror: Theatre and Reality (2016), Ryan Claycomb expresses dismay that “Carol Martin’s work in *Theatre of the Real* is not mentioned at all” (282).

The influence of Martin’s ‘theatre of the real’ and conversations generated surrounding this field of work is clear; however, as with all terms that attempt to categorise the amorphous – something always “emerging” (*Dramaturgy*, 1) – the term itself (alongside the related terms of ‘documentary theatre’ and ‘verbatim theatre’) has become restrictive.

1.3 Literature survey: theatre of the real

I have summarised the major ideas of Martin’s work on theatre of the real and noted her influence in the field. This section formulates the problem that I have noticed with the term ‘theatre of the real’, and also focuses on the contribution of other scholars to this area of study.

As noted, in her review of *Theatre of the Real*, Tomlin suggests the relevance of Martin’s scholarship on theatre of the real can be attributed to its “broadening of our conception of a theatre of the real” (‘Review’ 282). That an understanding of theatre of the real can be broadened indicates that ‘theatre of the real’ is a definition that can be expanded and contracted to include work not instantly recognisable as belonging to this category. To explore this and evaluate Martin’s research further, I want to focus on Martin’s use of the word ‘recycle’: “‘theatre of the real’ identifies a wide range of theatre practices and styles that *recycle* reality” (*Theatre of the Real*, 5, my emphasis). To recycle something is not just to use or see the same thing over again, just as it was. The process of recycling gives something a new meaning: it changes its form for a different use; in short – it *transforms* the original object. As Susan Sontag affirms with regards to photography, “[p]hotography does not simply reproduce the real, it recycles it – a key procedure of modern society [...] things and events are put to new uses, assigned new meanings” (*On Photography* 174). The acknowledgement of this new transformation is missing from the discussion.

Although Martin notes that more performances now acknowledge “the complexity of the performance’s reality” (*Theatre of the Real* 9), and her aim in *Theatre of the Real* is to recognise “a shift in understanding [...] to one that includes a variety of forms and methods [...] a paradigm, a perspective, a subject, and the development of different methodologies” (4), the phrase “theatre of the real” tends not to encapsulate such seismic shifts. “Of the” suggests a close relationship, a symbiosis, a belonging: ‘the arm of the chair’ suggests the relationship between the arm and the whole chair, but also that they are irreversibly

conjoined: the arm belongs to the chair and cannot be easily severed from it. In such a way, theatre of the real suggests that the ‘theatre’ has come *from* the ‘real’ and that they are not easily separable. Other places where Martin discusses the term also point to a conjoining of ‘theatre’ and ‘real’, rather than a separation. As discussed, in *Dramaturgy...* Martin suggests that ‘theatre of the real’ is “also known as” a wide variety of other terms (1). In *Theatre of the Real*, Martin describes ‘theatre of the real’ as something that “includes” other things (4).

Definitions which consider the theatrical event as the *product* of the real are not useful to my investigation which centres upon *how* the real is *used* in discourse and its effects. An understanding that relies on theatre as a product *of the* real assumes power lies with an elusive and literalised real as a driving creative force of the theatrical event. Rather, I wish to explore the reverse of this dynamic: there is no elusive ‘real’ from which theatre is made – any suggestion of a real comes *from* theatrical effects and processes, and it is these processes which this theatre investigates. In this way, my interest is not what the real does to humans in theatre (where the human is passive), but what humans do with the real (where the human is active): from *what*, to *how*.

Martin uses the term ‘theatre of the real’ whilst at the same time identifying the shifts towards “ambiguity and multiple viewpoints” (*Theatre of the Real* 9): the term does not correlate effectively with her developed understanding of these theatrical shifts. I understand that portmanteau terms are helpful points from which to embark into discussion, but the usefulness of this term should be further destabilised. The necessity to re-evaluate Martin’s definition of ‘theatre of the real’ has been examined by other scholars. For example, the scholar and performer Liam Jarvis takes issue with Martin’s claim that “theatre of the real in all its forms participates in how we come to know, understand and analyse things” (Martin in Jarvis ‘Time-Sculptures...’ 30). Jarvis argues that “this presumes that we *can* come to know and understand” (my emphasis) and that his autobiographical work *Living Film Set* “might be better understood as an ambiguity machine that stages the inability to repossess that which *cannot* be retrieved” because “of far greater importance in this work is the way in which fiction and artifice might compensate for the absence of knowing” (30-31). Despite his autobiographical work falling within the remit of Martin’s far-reaching ‘theatre of the real’ definition, Jarvis suggests it “poses distinct challenges to the notion of a ‘theatre of the real’” (29) and, as such, it particularly problematises “a desire that is associated with what Carol Martin has identified as ‘theatre of the real’, namely, to access ‘the real thing’” (23). It is precisely this problematising that my thesis is engaged with. As stated in my introduction, I argue that theatre of the real has shifted focus: the central dramaturgical aim is no longer for

legitimacy, but instead to highlight and explore the impossibility and ambiguity of what Martin terms “the real thing” (*Theatre of the Real* 4).⁸ Chapters Three, Four, and Five will consider this in relation to Crouch, Blythe, and Noble.

Other scholars have begun to establish that theatre of the real is moving away from overt realist and political aspirations. This is often discussed in terms of the burgeoning experimental techniques employed by practitioners. In her 2016 PhD thesis, Cyrielle Garson uses the phrase “post-realism” to describe “a move away from documentary realism” towards a form that breaches the confines of what might traditionally be understood as verbatim theatre (32). Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson also highlight the experimental techniques that documentary practitioners now turn to in order to complicate the ‘real’: “eclecticism shows no sign of abating as forms of fact-based theatre continue to diversify” (*Get Real* ix).⁹ Whilst these works show strength in highlighting and analysing the scope of new forms of theatre of the real, there is further insight to be gained as to why such shifts have occurred, which is the gap this thesis addresses.

The instability of the term ‘theatre of the real’ not only relates to ontology but also highlights that Martin’s own expansion of the ‘theatre of the real’ category points towards a dissatisfaction with the concepts of ‘documentary theatre’ and ‘verbatim theatre’. It is pertinent here to offer an explanation of the understanding of these terms, and evaluate some criticism in this field. ‘Documentary theatre’ has a long history and is connected to other historical theatrical forms (including ‘Reality Theatre’ and ‘Theatre of Fact’). The defining feature of documentary theatre is that it uses documentary material to create a play script, as Martin describes: “it is useful to understand it as created from a specific body of archived material: interviews, documents, hearings, records, video, film, photographs, etc” (‘Bodies of Evidence’ 5).

In 2011, Derek Paget, an eminent researcher in this area, indicated that “the latest British manifestation of documentary theatre” is ‘verbatim’ and ‘tribunal’ plays (‘Broken Tradition’ 227). The distinction between verbatim theatre and documentary theatre is that verbatim theatre is characterised by using the precise verbatim speech of original contributors. Mary Luckhurst recognises that the term is “specific to the UK” (200) and cites Paget as its

⁸ Importantly, Martin’s recognition that theatre of the real “includes a variety of forms and methods [...] and the development of different methodologies” (4) is not the same as my recognition of a shift in the underlying dramaturgical aims of these methods. The proliferation of form has been noted by many, but I am noticing what appears to be more of an ideological shift.

⁹ Some of the theatre that Forsyth and Megson promote under this category includes work by Look Left Look Right Theatre Company, Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch* (2006), and DV8’s *To Be Straight With You* (2007) (x-xi).

originator – the term “originated in England and was first coined in an article [for *New Theatre Quarterly*] by Derek Paget in 1987” (201). Amanda Stuart-Fisher explains that, “[u]nlike documentary theatre then, verbatim tends to acquire its authority more from its use of word-for-word accounts than its use of concrete, retrieved and verifiable ‘evidence’” (196). Chris Megson offers a clear definition of tribunal plays, a strand of documentary theatre: “[t]ribunal theatre consists of the meticulous re-enactment of edited transcripts of state-sanctioned inquiries that address perceived miscarriages of justice and flaws in the operations and accountability of public institutions” (*Half The Picture* 195). Each of these distinct terms that fall under the umbrella of ‘documentary theatre’ are important because they differentiate practices and point towards changes in histories of practice. However, it is worth considering whether the terms are still useful to describe theatre that is more hybrid in form, or whether in these instances they can be misleading.

Despite the growth of new and more divergent forms of theatre of the real, some scholars note that there has been surprisingly little research that examines the capacity of documentary and verbatim theatre to accurately portray and recreate the historical events they seek to depict. For example, Sam Haddow’s 2013 PhD thesis demonstrates “the ways in which a lack of attention to theatre-as-historiography has allowed some uninformed and unstable historical methodologies to proliferate in theatrical discourses” (2). Haddow’s thesis “introduces the issue of theatre’s historiographic capacities, and by practical demonstration indicates the dangers of allowing these capacities to remain unaddressed” (11). In a follow-up article, he addresses these concerns in relation to the verbatim play *The Riots* (2011). Haddow comments that “this piece directly intervened in the present moment and sought, through a process of documentation, to function as a piece of historiography” (4). Haddow’s criticism of Gillian Slovo (playwright) and Nicolas Kent (director of the play and then Artistic Director of the Tricycle Theatre) is that, in their desire to produce a play free from representative trappings which reaches the ‘truth’, Kent and Slovo perpetuated what they intended to critique:

The irony here is that, in their attempts to ‘uncover’ the truth behind the riots and escape the manipulations of ‘spin’, Slovo and Kent have employed strategies that obscure their conceptions of ‘truth’ behind notions of transparency that are always irretrievably ‘manipulated’. (8)

Haddow here concludes his analysis that “Slovo’s adherence to narrative structures militates against her supposed fidelity to ‘documentary fact’” (7). These problematic discourses surrounding verbatim and tribunal drama – often elided by the playwrights and producing

theatres themselves – have led to what Haddow terms “an omission [...] both in the practice and theory of verbatim theatre” (30). Whilst I am unconvinced that there has been a stark omission in the theory of verbatim theatre, I share Haddow’s concern that, within the practice, production and study of verbatim theatre, insufficient attention is paid to addressing complicated questions surrounding theatre’s capacity to present actuality.

There are, in fact, several scholarly examples of critical and theoretical questioning of verbatim theatre – quite a few published in 2013 (the date of Haddow’s thesis completion) and earlier. Mary Luckhurst suggests the “underlying conviction expressed by [...] practitioners that verbatim theatre can lay claim to a greater historical veracity” is “troubling” (*‘Verbatim Theatre...’* 203). In 2006, Stephen Bottoms noted that “such plays can too easily become disingenuous exercises in the presentation of ‘truth,’ failing (or refusing?) to acknowledge their own highly selective manipulation of opinion and rhetoric” (57-58). Mateusz Borowski and Malgorzata Sugiera’s edited collection *Fictional realities / Real fictions: Contemporary Theatre in Search of a New Mimetic Paradigm* (2007) explores the tension between reality and fiction in contemporary theatre, with their own joint contribution dismantling authenticity in British verbatim theatre (189-198).

I want to extend Martin’s definition of theatre of the real to include theatre that not only “recycle[s]” reality, but that also claims “a relationship to reality” in less straightforward ways (*Theatre of the Real* 5). I propose that this theatre of the real includes theatre that uses fictional narratives (as opposed to real ones), but its form, content and dramaturgical devices still strongly claim “a relationship to reality” through a foregrounded attempt to interrogate, highlight and explore the concept of the real more rigorously than a ‘well-made’ fictional play. The reason for this is that the real inheres less in the content or in the origins of a play’s development than in the ways in which the play’s ‘reality’ is constituted through, as I shall demonstrate, three main forms of ‘indexical trace’.

Extending Martin’s definition to include productions that are not perhaps instantly recognisable as theatre of the real and are one-step removed from a direct “relationship to reality” could be deemed problematic: surely every play and performance could then be termed theatre of the real, engaging in some way with questions and observations of real life outside the theatre, performed by real people? Indeed, theatre’s close alliance with the real is not a sudden, new or unexamined concept. However, my extension of Martin’s definition draws critical attention to the increase in plays whose primary focus is to explore the problematic positioning of the real in theatre, despite not relying on the ‘recycling’ techniques

that fall within Martin's theatre of the real remit.¹⁰ These plays destabilise and interrogate the authority of the real. In widening the definition, my thesis examines the implications of Martin's pertinent observation that there is "an emerging theatre of the real" distinct from its traditional characteristics (*Dramaturgy* 1). The widening I call for is specifically intended to include plays that use fictional and imagined narratives and characters to interrogate, address and construct the real, rather than relying on recognisable dramaturgical practices belonging to theatre of the real. I argue that, although these plays may not be instantly recognisable as theatre of the real, they should be embraced under this definition because they place the instability of the real at the forefront of their work.

The appetite and necessity for future work in this field is clear from the publication of a range of recent exciting monographs that analyse theatre of the real. Jess McCormack's *Choreography and Verbatim Theatre* (2018) is a welcome addition to scholarship that focuses on the area of verbatim dance-theatre. There has been little writing that focuses on this field so McCormack's intervention is an encouraging sign of growth in the field. Other recent publications also focus on diverse theatre of the real practices: for example, Rivka Syd Eisner's *Performing Remembering: Women's Memories of War in Vietnam* (2018) explores performances by female war veterans in Ho Chi Minh City. What I think is most telling is that there have been two recent publications which offer readers an insight into *how* to make verbatim theatre: Alana Valentine's *Bowerbird: The Art of Making Theatre drawn From Life* (2018) explores the process behind the making of her plays and Robin Belfield's *Telling the Truth: How to Make Verbatim Theatre* (2018) offers a breakdown of the process of creating a verbatim play. Further, the theatremaker and scholar Clare Summerskill has a forthcoming book with Routledge currently titled *Creating Verbatim Theatre from Oral Histories*, which will also focus on the practicalities of making verbatim work. The publication of these books suggests that practitioners are now more open about discussing the constructed nature of theatre of the real texts. However, the continuing tension between theatre of the real's connection to the real and poststructuralist ideas that dismantle that reality call for further interrogation, research and reconceptualising, which this thesis aims to address.

1.4 The 'intradiegetic real' and 'extradiegetic real'

¹⁰ I analyse these thoughts in relation to my case studies, but Dennis Kelly's *Taking Care of Baby* (2007), and Tim Crouch's *Adler and Gibb* (2014) are also clear examples of such plays, as noted in my introduction.

In analysing how the real functions in theatre, I have identified two forms of reality theatre: 1) theatre that unreflectively claims to present the real and 2) theatre that interrogates its own construction of the real. This division might be construed as theatre that inhabits two distinct roles: theatre that presents the ‘intradiegetic real’ and theatre that performs the ‘extradiegetic real’. My use of these terms in relation to the ‘reality effects’ of theatre is inspired by Liam Jarvis, who argues that darkness has different functions on the contemporary stage. He states, “that *darkness performs*” (‘Creating in the Dark’ 89) and claims that within theatre there is “*diegetic darkness*” and “*non-diegetic or extradiegetic darkness*” (91). “Diegetic darkness” is darkness that is used to represent “other darkneses”, within the fiction of the play:

what I term as *diegetic darkness* acts as an indexical sign to a referent within the fictive cosmos of drama (i.e. darkness that ‘performs’ in the narrative world as other darkneses). (91)

Jarvis states that “non-diegetic darkness” on the stage is darkness that is separate from the meaning and narrative of the play, such as the use of blackout to signal the end of a scene:

non-diegetic or extradiegetic darkness operates in a cause-and-effect relationship outside of the ‘world of the play’ in the theatrical circumstance. Perhaps the most common example is the use of blackouts to cue the audience for the commencement or ending of a performance (i.e. darkness that is not experienced by characters in a narrative world). (91)

However, Jarvis also recognises darkness operating on a more metaphorical example and considers examples in which “darkness performs as a metaphor” (108). This distinction is useful: although there may be a collective accepted understanding of what ‘darkness’ constitutes, its aesthetic and metaphorical meaning can vary dependent on its functionality in theatre. Jarvis’ suggestion that “darkness should be understood as relational and pluralistic insofar as it performs different roles in different contexts” (89-90) and that, because of these roles, “engineered darkness might be thought to be its own kind of *performer*” (107) can be applied to the conceptual debates surrounding theatre of the real. I take my cue not only from Jarvis, but also narrative theory, which has identified ‘intradiegetic’ and ‘extradiegetic’ narrators of stories: the former who are embedded in the narrative described to the reader, the latter existing outside the described events. In adopting this distinction for the theatre, I contend that in plays in which the real is intradiegetic, there is a tendency towards inscribing the real as an unexamined foundation of the play – the play represents a recognisable world, the action is a direct dramatic imitation of real life and the characters partake in the singular world of the story. What is ‘real’ is *internal* to the narrative of the play and, therefore,

implicit. Documentary, verbatim and autobiographical plays clearly mainly operate within this framework because what is ‘real’ about them is implied in the form of the play, the framing devices within which the play sits. An audience will likely be aware they are watching a reconstruction of historical events: what is ‘real’ about the play does not have to be overtly stated because it is usually taken as a given foundation of the work. I argue that in plays in which the real is extradiegetic, however, construction of the real is foregrounded and discursively excavated as a central part of the performance – the performance is characterised through external reflection or embodied interrogation of the real, in addition to the main story. I suggest that, in a theatrical space, the ‘intradiegetic real’ *presents* the real and the ‘extradiegetic real’ *performs* the real.

In suggesting these two dramaturgical modes of the real in theatre, I am not attempting to create a false binary between two types of theatre. It will become evident from the following case studies that, whilst there may be a tendency towards a manifestation of the real that is internal or external to the narrative, often plays and performances use both. Rather, I use these terms to clarify the *uses* of the real in theatre – at times, functional; at times, conceptual; and, at times, an amalgamation of the two. The terms shed light on the theatrical real as something that has different performative, dramaturgical and political objectives, rather than something externally abstract that practitioners attempt to illuminate. Analysing the inclination towards use of the real as *intra-* or *extra-* diegetic to a performance clarifies how the real functions in the intended effect of these works. Despite these two modes appearing to be radically different in aesthetic form and ideological function, they use several shared dramaturgical processes, through which they illuminate their varying interpretations of the real on stage.

1.5 Indexical traces of the real in performance

By using the performative conduits of the archive, presence, and technology, my three case study practitioners draw attention to the real in their plays. I term these dramaturgical processes ‘indexical traces of the real’. Due to its prominence in my argument, it is necessary to define what is meant by the term ‘indexical trace’.

The concept of the ‘index’ is most readily attributed to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914) whose semiotic work on signs offers a description of three different kinds of signs: the ‘symbol’, the ‘icon’ and the ‘index’. Of these three semiotic concepts, the ‘index’ is the least understood but Peirce gives a clear description:

Indices may be distinguished from other signs, or representations, by three characteristic marks: first, that they have no significant resemblance to their objects; second, that they refer to individuals, single units, single collections of units, or single continua; third, that they direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion. But it would be difficult if not impossible, to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality. Psychologically, the action of indices depends upon association by contiguity, and not upon association by resemblance or upon intellectual operations. (*Philosophical Writings* 108)

Whilst indicating that the indexical is characteristic of most signs, Peirce asserts that the index is primarily distinct from the symbol (which is arbitrary in relation to that which it points to) and the icon (which shares a resemblance to that which it points to). The index, on the other hand, is something which is inferred and which does not bear a mimetic resemblance to that which it points. For example, “a sundial or clock indicates the time of day” (*Philosophical Writings* 108). In semiotic terms, an indexical sign is a physical sign that is not visually similar or does not resemble the object that is signified but that has a sensory, even physical, feature that points towards the signified and connects the two. For example, the smell of pine needles may signify the Christmas season. The pine needles do not physically or ontologically resemble Christmas – itself an abstract concept – but the sensation produced from the smell may ‘point’ towards Christmas for people who celebrate the holiday. The index that can be found at the back of a book is a tool that is used to ‘point’ towards the position of items, but it does not describe those items, like a dictionary definition would. As Peirce writes, the index “forces the attention to the particular object intended without describing it” (*Peirce on Signs* 181). Key to the index is the lack of distinct description: “[t]he index asserts nothing; it only says ‘There!’ It takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object, and there it stops” (*The Essential Peirce* 226). In other words, the index functions as a refocusing of attention – a semiotic highlighter.

In 2007, an edition of the *Differences* journal was dedicated to the study of indexicality and, in its introduction, Mary Ann Doane remarks upon the unique diversity of indexical signs:

As photographic trace or impression, the index seems to harbor a fullness, an excessiveness of detail that is always supplemental to meaning or intention. Yet, the index as *deixis* implies an emptiness, a hollowness that can only be filled in specific, contingent, always mutating situations. It is this dialectic of the empty and the full that lends the index an eeriness and uncanniness not associated with the realms of the icon or symbol.
(2)

The sufficiency and insufficiency of the analogy between the ‘indexical trace’ and its referent recognises the unique versatility in the relationship between the two and also the importance of the personal sensory connection made by whoever is making the association.

Janelle Reinelt cites Philip Rosen’s genealogy of the document and documentary and specifically quotes his use of the concept of the indexical trace:

By the eighteenth century, the document is not only manuscripts or deeds, but also tombstones, coins, and other legal or commercial artefacts; in the nineteenth century, the adjective ‘documentary’ enters the language and according to Rosen involves historiography because the *OED* speaks of documentary authority. As the ability to authenticate and interpret documents comes to the fore, so too does the historian. Power lies in control of the documents, “the indexical traces of the presence of a real past. [...] The control of pastness in the register of meaning achieves its most culturally prestigious, disciplined versions in the practice of historiography” (1993, p. 65). (Reinelt in Forsyth and Megson 7)

Reinelt also quotes Rosen’s use of the term in her essay included in Martin’s *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (2012):

In his contribution to a useful book, *Theorizing Documentary*, Rosen is at pains to show the connection between issues of documentary representation and historiography that lies in “the indexical traces of the presence of a real past” in documentary, in news reporting, and in historiography (ibid.:64-5). (40)

A third use of Rosen’s work that mentions the indexical trace can be found in Reinelt’s co-written article with Elaine Aston on Andrea Dunbar’s *The Arbor*:

Philip Rosen, writing in *Theorizing Documentary*, connects documentary representation with historiography through “the indexical traces of the presence of a real past” in both documentaries and in historiography. The verbatim words of the interviewees form the trace of the past, the index, through the actors’ bodies and words, of the presence of the trace of the reality for which they stand. This is a pretty strong truth claim in a postmodern age. (290)

Reinelt’s use of Rosen’s phrase across three separate pieces of scholarship suggests that indexical traces are significant to theatre of the real, and they merit closer attention. Further, the relationship between the real and its trace has been noted by others. For example, Sontag highlights that photographic images are “an interpretation of the real; [...] also a trace, something directly stenciled [*sic*] off the real, like a footprint or a death mask” (*On Photography* 154). Sontag’s consideration of photographs as a “trace” that comes “off the real” indicates that discourses surrounding the real recognise the importance of the “trace” as

a way to calibrate and codify the real. This next section examines the traces of the real that I identify as prevalent in contemporary performance.

1.6 Indexical traces of the real in performance: the archive, presence, technology

This thesis argues that the ‘archive’, ‘presence’, and ‘technology’ all function as indexical traces of the real in the case studies: they are the indicators that suggest how the real is constructed and functions. These three combine to form a ‘reality braid’: the interlacing of these different performance processes work together to foreground the motif of the real.

In order to clarify notions of what can be understood by the terms ‘archive’, ‘presence’ and ‘technology’ in relation to this project, I will now offer an analysis of each as they are the discursive apparatus that I use to discuss the indexical trace of the real in performance. Each term already carries with it a weight of preconceived meanings and I intend to outline some of those here. This next section also highlights some of the key scholarly and philosophical debates in these areas, and begins to interrogate the relationship of these concepts to their use in theatre. In the chapters relating to my case studies, I intend to further situate my particular use of these concepts in relation to specific examples of practice.

1.7 Archive

And: the archive is also a place of dreams.

– Carolyn Steedman (69)

An archive is a historical record of something, or a physical building in which documents and objects are kept. In this section I will unravel a few key ideas about archives that will be mobilised in the following chapters: key definitions of the archive; an analysis of the relationship between theatre and the archive; an exploration of how the archive relates to theories of time (past, present and future); theories which explore the power of the archive to shape events; emotions attached to the archive, including desire; and, the archive’s relationship to theories of presence and absence.

There are several questions worth asking about the relationship between archives and the theatre. Firstly, and in relation to ‘theatre of the real’, it is worth asking whether the past

can be an archivable event through performance, or not? To what extent is a verbatim play contributing to the creation of an archive of a specific event? Secondly, it is important to consider the discourse surrounding performance that argues that performance itself is a unique event – indeed, an unarchivable event because of its dependence on ‘liveness’. Finally, how might archival remains function in theatre as indexical traces of the real in performance? For example, if an object is brought on stage and is said to have belonged to a once-living person, to what extent can this object be considered a piece of archival evidence that irrupts the fictionality of the stage? This may extend to other archival objects used in a piece of theatre such as documentary footage and sound recordings which suggest that they have been transposed from an external archive source. Such objects appear not to have been created specially for the performance, but transplanted there, and therefore their use in performance requires attention. I will now investigate the archive in further detail.

1.7.1 *What is an archive?*

Archiving is a process through which information (both material and immaterial) is stored and categorised. In this way, the archive is also a type of index – a guide to itemised objects, an indicator of how matter is categorised. More importantly, archiving is a practice of selection, of reduction, of choosing one thing and bestowing on it an importance not given to another thing. Where an archive exists, why it exists and who curated the archive are all important questions to consider because an archive is related to power: someone has decided what it is important to preserve and retain, in favour of things which are forgotten and discarded, (though, often, an archive itself may remain forgotten and untouched for many years). Carolyn Steedman offers a useful definition of what the commonplace understanding of an archive may be:

[T]he many places in which the past (which does not now exist, but which once did actually happen; which cannot be retrieved, but which may be represented) has deposited some traces and fragments, usually in written form. In these archives someone (usually from about 1870 onwards, across the Western world) has catalogued and indexed these traces. (69)

This is a generalised view of the archive in the West: somewhere one can find out about the past through deposited items. Steedman notes that the archive is a place where *traces are indexed*. Charles Merewether similarly notes that the archive is the basis for historical writing: “the archive, as distinct from a collection or library, constitutes a repository or

ordered system of documents and records, both verbal and visual, that is the foundation from which history is written” (10). Paul Ricoeur highlights an archive’s multi-faceted relationship with institutions, both shaping and shaped by them: “[a]rchives are said, in the one case, to result from institutional activity; in the other, they are said to be produced by or received by the entity for which the documents in question are the archives” (Ricoeur in Merewether 66).

Julian Thomas’ work on phenomenological archaeology is useful in highlighting a distinction between two differing understandings of the archive (or ‘archaeological record’, as it is understood in the discipline of archaeology). Drawing on the scholar Linda Patrik, Thomas notes that “while many archaeologists may use the term ‘the archaeological record’ as a shorthand for the range of materials, deposits and other information”, Patrik “draws a distinction between two understandings of the notion of a record: a fossil and a textual record” (55-56). In this context, the fossil record is the remains of material – not textual – culture, which is a model for archaeology in which past human behaviour can be determined by physical outcomes, found in the record – it is a scientific method of archaeology (56). By comparison, the textual record relies on the understanding that archival evidence is “less an imprint of past actions than something which has been encoded” (69). This method suggests that context is important in relation to material evidence and “[w]e do not simply read an unambiguous message *out* of the record, we read an interpretation *into* it” (59). Thomas’ description of these two understandings of the record suggests that, in the fossil record, the archive comes *out* into the world of the archivist, whilst in the textual record the archivist goes *into* the world of the archive. Or, in relation to my creation of the intradiegetic and extradiegetic real, the fossil record materially presents the past to the archaeologist, whilst in the textual record the archaeologist performatively interprets the past. These distinctions describe different ways of reading and responding to an archival record and I will now dig a little deeper into some of the ways an archive can be read.

1.7.2 *An archive is past, present and future*

As traditionally understood, an archive relates to the past, as Steedman identifies:

The Archive is made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also from the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there. (68)

As Steedman highlights, some things arrive at an archive through chance, not intention. Discovering objects from the past in the archive holds a certain allure, as Susan Sontag explains with reference to old photographs:

Photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects – unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. (*On Photography* 69)

Interestingly, as Sontag articulates, the appeal of objects from the past is that their presence seems unplanned – they appear plucked from history, and this ‘accidental’ nature bestows on them the “magic of the real” (ibid). The ‘magic’ of the archive is that it is a trace of previous events and people from a time before, that feels lost: “things can serve as witnesses to a human past, evidence which substantiates particular narratives” (Thomas 81). The past is generally considered the temporal realm of the archive. However, what if the archive was not concerned about the past, but about the present? A common idiom is that commentators should ‘look to the past to understand the present’, and indeed this is one way historians use historical records. As David Harlan considers, a “sense of the past is a way of being in the present. At its best it is a way of arguing with ourselves, a means of rethinking who we might become by rethinking who we once were” (209). Moreover, whoever uses the archive is not using it *in* the past (for that is the past), but in the present moment, for present means. Thomas suggests that this gap between the past and present is key to the notion of recording:

The very notion of a ‘record’ implies a separation between an absent past and the here-and-now present. The past is something which has stopped, is ended, and its boundedness from the present seems to guarantee its integrity as a sutured entity. (56)

Further, he argues that, notwithstanding the past, it is “the presentness of things” which is important: “the presentness of things is as significant as their evocation of a past” (81). Other scholars have attended to the notion of the past existing through the present. The historian Geoffrey Elton considers “[t]he past is over and done with: it cannot be relived. It can be reconstructed – seen and understood again – only if it has left present matter behind” (21). Further, Elton suggests that only traces existing in the present can be considered the past:

Historical study is not the study of the past but the study of present traces of the past; if men have said, thought, done or suffered anything of which nothing any longer exists, those things are as though they had never been. (20)

Elton makes the point that only what is materially tangible in the present can be studied, and this is different from an external ‘past’ one may try to grasp. Indeed, an archive can only be useful in the present – as Thomas notes, “[a]rchaeology is a textual practice, which is performed in the present upon materials which speak to us of the past. What we produce is an interpretation, which is not of the past, but which stands for the past” (64). If we can only produce an interpretation from an archive, what if the archive was not even concerned about the present, but about the future? Perhaps an archive is not a place where things come to rest, where things end but, as Jacques Derrida considers, they are a place of *arkhē* – “there where things *commence*” – a place where things begin (*Archive Fever* 1). Derrida suggests that the “archive has always been a *pledge*, and like every pledge [*gage*], a token of the future” (*Archive Fever* 18). Other scholars also speculate that the archive is a futuristic site. Keith Jenkins argues that it is the job of the person engaged with archival work to create the future:

The sifting out of what is historically significant depends on us, so that what ‘the past’ means to us is always *our* task to ‘figure out’; what we want our inheritance/history ‘to be’ is always waiting to be ‘read’ and written in the future like any text: the past as history lies before us, not behind us. (*Refiguring* 30).

Thomas also highlights that our engagement with things is fundamentally forward-thinking: “[o]bjects are also projected forward, in that they are engaged with our projects. [...] The creation of material things presumes future contexts of interaction, so that things are futural” (81). Following this reading, an archive lies in wait, expectant of its future use. Merewether further details how archival documents can be cross-temporal: “[t]he temporality of the document appears to carry some residue of the past into the future: a passageway across time and space” (129). He describes the “sense of a deferred temporality” and “a strange suspension of time” a document produces (129). The idea of the archive being bound up between times, possibly in the creation of something new, in the future, leads to my next consideration – how the archive creates the event.

1.7.3 *An archive creates the event*

In *Archive Fever*, one of the most influential theoretical works about the nature of the archive, Derrida argues that the way in which past events are archived directly impacts upon the content of the events: in short, the archive creates the event. Derrida asks us to imagine the impact that technology would have had on the work of Freud and his contemporaries and

suggests that, if the history of psychoanalysis had been conserved differently, the history itself would have been altered:

It would have transformed this history from top to bottom and in the most initial inside of its production, its very events. [...] the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archiveable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization process produces as much as it records the event. (16-17)

Similarly, Foucault argues that the archive is not a static institution or dusty book, it is the space in which meaning is produced:

we have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use). They are all these systems of statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call *archive*. (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 128)

Here, Foucault suggests the archive is that which plays a role in the construction of meaning, and the control of discourse. This point of view is detected in other scholars: Sontag suggests, in relation to photography, that “[i]n America, the photographer is not simply the person who records the past but the one who invents it” (*On Photography* 67). Scott argues that:

History is in the paradoxical position of creating the objects it claims only to discover. By creating, I do not mean making things up, but rather constructing them as legitimate and coherent objects of knowledge. (85)

This construction occurs because archives and history are concerned with choice. The person at work in the archive chooses what to focus on and establishes the direction of research as Keith Jenkins notes: “the past cannot tell historians which aspects of it ‘it’ wants them to study” (*Refiguring* 29). Jenkins draws attention to the active participation of the person engaged with the archive/history in its creation, arguing that we should reject the idea

that the traces from ‘the before now’ which historians work on contain *in themselves* a specifically historical kind of information and that the ‘knowledge’ based upon it is a specifically historical kind of knowledge. Rather it is application of the historian’s particular discursive practices [...] that *turns* such traces of ‘the before now’ into something historical; nothing is ever *intrinsically* historical – least of all ‘the before now’. Thus it might be better to call such traces *archival* inasmuch as they can become the objects of enquiry of any number of discourses without belonging to any of them; historians have no exclusive rights to the archive, ‘the past’ does not in any way have the property of history in it. (*Refiguring* 38-39)

Here, Jenkins argues that the traces from the past (archival traces) do not contain anything special in themselves – it is the use of them by the historian that turns these archival traces into something invested with the properties of the ‘historical’. As the artists Călin Dan and Josif Kiraly note, “people make sense of archives, not the other way around” (Dan and Kiraly in Merewether 113). The performance scholar Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) also highlights the archivist’s interpretative agency: “[b]ones might remain the same, even though their story may change, depending on who examines them” (19).

The focus on the active participation of the historian and the ‘archivisation process’ suggests the archive is strongly connected to systems of power. Firstly, because an archive is engaged in a selection process, it is concerned with conveying that some things are better, or more useful, than other things. Although the historian may choose what to look at, they can only choose from what is there. Therefore, the contents of the archive suggest what one should be looking at, what one should be remembering. In this way, the archive helps to form a collective memory and Sontag describes the power at play in such a memory:

What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 76-77)

Elsewhere Sontag discusses how the act of photography – which is in itself an act of recording, of archiving – is “always, potentially, a means of control” (*On Photography* 156). Sontag recognises that, through any type of documentation, or recording, such as photography, “something becomes part of a system of information, fitted into schemes of classification and storage” (157). In this way, the archive is patriarchal: it is concerned with control and authority, and policing what can be re-remembered. Steedman indicates that the perceived passivity of the archive – “it just sits there until it is read, and used, and narrativised” (68) – is an example of how power avoids confrontation:

Its condition of being deflects outrage: in its quiet folder and bundles is the neatest demonstration of how state power has operated, through ledgers and lists and indictments, and through what is missing from them. (68)

Attempts at power and control are born from a desire of wanting something. I now want to turn my attention to this sort of longing-for as another key component in consideration of the archive.

1.7.4 *An archive is longing / desire*

Steedman argues that the archive “is to do with longing and appropriation” (81). The purpose of going to an archive is because it contains something – or might contain something that someone wants. This longing for what the archive, and archival objects, can provide indicates that the archive is not something one can maintain a historical distance from. If, as Thomas suggests, the archive can be ‘read’ or interpreted discursively as a text, it is also can produce certain feelings and reactions to what it contains in the one who comes into contact with it. As such, the archive intrinsically relates to affect. So, although Thomas claims that historians and archaeologists bestow meaning on the archive through how they ‘read’ it, perhaps what is really important is what the archive does to them in return.

What might the affective experience of the archive, or archival objects be? I have already noted how Sontag highlights one reason people are drawn to artefacts is the spontaneous nature of their arrival, which creates “the magic of the real” (69). Part of the lure of the archive is that – for the one who engages with it – it offers a unique experience, that only you alone are privilege to. The singular and special quality of this moment is alluring: as Steedman notes, “the Historian who goes to the Archive must always be an unintended reader, will always read that which was never intended for his or her eyes” (75). To discover something no one else knows is a form of power through knowledge, but the individual nature of this experience may also produce loneliness. Stereotypical images of archives are images of loneliness: a single person at the far end of a long aisle of shelves engaged in solitary study, or surrounded by a mound of dusty boxes. As Steedman considers, the archive allows “the imagining of a particular and modern form of loneliness” (72). In considering the loneliness of the archivist, Steedman draws on the work of Richard Cobb who identifies that the Historian’s problem is “that of loneliness, especially loneliness in the urban context” (Cobb 17). This suggests that to go to an archive is an attempt to make oneself less lonely.

To follow this, it is important to note that the experience of the archive may not always be a pleasant one – something may be uncovered which is painful, or shameful. “History is what hurts”, writes Fredric Jameson (88). The different affects an archive can potentially produce confusion in this way: how should one respond to it? With excitement? With reverence? With detachment? With fear? As Sontag considers when writing about the dual power of images of suffering, what is found in the archive may produce a variety of strong responses: “[t]he photograph gives mixed signals. Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle!” (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 68). Part of the confusion that the

archive creates is because, despite its regulated and singular appearance, it is neither one thing, nor another: it generates multiple complex emotions and knowledge. The American artist Renée Green explains how an abundance of materials in the archive can lead to “a cancelling-out effect which is possible when confronted with more than is comprehensible” (Green in Merewether 49). This describes the challenge that the surplus of the archive presents – a plethora of materials can obscure quick understanding, which Green suggests “can also be thought of in relation to absences, lacunae, holes which occur in the midst of densities of information” (49). Paradoxically, there is “negation in abundance” (Green in Merewether 49). It is this ability of the archive to be two things at once to which I now turn.

1.7.5 *An archive is presence and absence*

As discussed, an archive is concerned with present traces of the past – the materiality of objects in the present. The archive is connected to ‘presence’ – what is materially and tangibly visible and therefore what *appears* – or, what is selected to appear. The appearance of what was not there before can seem revelatory – perhaps, revolutionary. Steedman argues that the *making-present* process of the archive is “the social historian’s dream, of bringing to life those who do not for the main part exist, not even between the lines of state papers and legal documents, who are not really present” (70). Foucault describes how the archive is “a reflection that shows us quite simply, and in shadow, what all those in the foreground are looking at. It restores, as if by magic, what is lacking in every gaze” (*The Order of Things* 15). Thomas also highlights the evocative nature of archival and archaeological material: “[t]heir mnemonic character is a facet of their part in establishing a world: things can evoke the presence of certain persons and qualities at a non-discursive level” (85). The ability of one thing to conjure up the presence of another thing fundamentally relies on the absence of that other thing. As this exploration into the archive has begun to highlight, what is anachronistically *there*, present in the archive, will also reveal what is *not* there – what is absent. Thomas argues that refiguring archaeology in a metaphysical way helps to illuminate the absent: an “archaeological poetics involves finding ways of expressing and taking the measure of something which is absent” (77). Similarly, Burton reflects that the “history of the archive is a history of loss” (66). All that can be found in an archive is evidence of a past time and people that are no longer here. Paradoxically, the more one tries to counteract this vanishing – to bring an archival object into view, the further it slips away. As Thomas indicates, “[t]he more that we attempt to grasp the essence of the earth by addressing it

directly, the more that it withdraws from us” (76). In *Performing Remains* (2011), Rebecca Schneider introduces the idea that disappearance is not antithetical to the archive: “it is one of the primary insights of poststructuralism that disappearance is that which marks all documents, all records, and all material remains. Indeed, remains become themselves through disappearance as well” (102). Such paradoxes are explored and questioned in Schneider’s work and she highlights the tension between “the logic of the archive” (remains that can be documented) and performance which is impermanent and cannot be archived (98). Peggy Phelan similarly argues that “[p]erformance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does it becomes something other than performance” (146).

The tension between presence and absence is central to how the archive operates. Diana Taylor argues that embodied performance (repertoire) can be considered another way to transmit and store knowledge, suggesting “the repertoire, on a very practical level, expands the traditional archive used by academic departments in the humanities” (26). This knowledge is another sort of archival knowledge that is not dependent on written documentation. Central to the repertoire, Taylor argues, is presence: “[t]he repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there,” being a part of the transmission” (20). With this in mind, it is now necessary to conclude this section and turn attention to interrogating what I label another ‘indexical trace of the real’: *presence*.

To conclude, in this section I explained that the archive is traditionally understood as a historical record and described how the archivization process is a practice of storing and categorising information, which not only records events, but also “invents” them, as described by Derrida and Sontag (*Archive Fever* 16-17, *On Photography* 67). Drawing on the work of Steedman, Merewether and Thomas, I discovered how the archive works to shape the past, as a basis for historical writing. Thomas’ work on phenomenological archaeology led to an understanding of two methods of engaging with the archive, as described by Linda Patrik: the fossil and textual record. The fossil record relies on empirical, material analysis, whilst the textual record is an interpretive way of reading the archive. This interpretive use of the archive – an archaeological poetics – raises the question of the direction of power between the archivist and the archive. Does the power really lie with the archive to ‘create’ events, or does power lie with the interpretive abilities of the archivist? From this, I analysed the affect of the archive: it can be a lonely space, but also an alluring one because it contains something someone desires. The archive holds the potential to generate a wide variety of emotions in those who come into contact with it. Whilst the archive is traditionally related to the past, the

material present of the archive and the forward-thinking existence of the archive complicates its temporality. My final key finding in relation to the archive is that it simultaneously is connected to both presence and absence. The definition of ‘archive’ that I will be carrying forward in the three case study chapters encompasses all these positions: the archive is a powerful material record of the past that can be interpretatively used and which inhabits a flexible, temporal space.

1.8 Presence

Occurring in relation to situated acts, ‘presence’ not only invites consciousness, but also directs attention outside the self into the social and the spatial, toward the enactment of ‘co-presence’ as well as perceptions and habituations of place. Presence implies temporality, too – a fulcrum of presence is tense and the relationship between past and present.

– Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks (1)

‘Presence’ is a term that carries a variety of definitions and philosophical understandings, especially in relation to its role in theatre. When presence becomes relevant, who or what is considered to have presence are significant questions to consider because, like the archive, presence is attached to power: something that is considered to have ‘presence’ is marked for special consideration and reverence. In this section, I will unravel a few key ideas about presence that will be mobilised in the following chapters: key definitions of presence; an analysis of the connection between presence and absence; an exploration of the elusive quality of presence; and, a description of presence as proximity, as a shared time and space.

1.8.1 *What is ‘presence’?*

The difficulty of the concept of ‘presence’ is that it carries an elusive quality and an exact definition is impossible to determine. One of the most common definitions of ‘presence’ is that it relates to the manifest existence of something, often in relation to another thing. This is the state of ‘being present’ with something else – sharing time and space together. Someone can be said to have ‘presence of mind’ or a ‘commanding presence’, or an actor is praised when it is considered they have great ‘stage presence’. A description of what exactly is meant by these phrases is hard to capture, though there is a general shared understanding which accounts for the ubiquity of their use. The ambiguous nature of ‘presence’ connects to the

hauntological meanings of the word: a stage medium will claim they can sense a ‘strong presence’ in the room. A ‘presence’ in this respect can relate to a thing or person that is unseen but asserts themselves, and it is this ghostly inhabitation that theatre naturally inhabits.

The close connection between presence and theatre is noted by many other scholars. Cormac Power’s comprehensive study of ‘presence’ highlights the dependency that theatre and presence have on each other: “the two terms are so connected as to seem almost synonymous” (1). Power “tries to re-situate presence as a key concept for theatre studies” (8) and argues,

it is the very potential of theatre to put presence *into play* that enables us to consider the importance of theatre as an art form that can allow us to reflect upon and question the construction of “reality” in the contemporary world. (9)

Archaeologies of Presence (edited by Giannachi, Kaye, and Shanks) is also useful in investigating this term as it “presents key analyses of the conditions, dynamics and dialectics that shape presence in – or in relation to – the acts of performance” (1). I will now explore a few different modes of ‘presence’ in theatre, which will be further extrapolated in my case studies. Unlike the archive, which is often materially evident, presence is a more elusive quality and so describing it in terms of theatre helps to conceptualise its meaning for theatre. To begin, it is pertinent to turn to presence as bodily proximity.

1.8.2 *Presence as proximity, a shared space*

The first definition the *OED* gives for ‘presence’ is the “fact or condition of being present; the state of being with or in the same place as a person or thing; attendance, company, society, or association”. This definition describes a shared physical and spatial presence. Understanding this should be evident: ‘presence’ is literally being in the same space as other things. In this way, presence is not only connected with sharing the same space as another, but also with visibility – with what one actually sees. Evidently, each audience member shares a co-presence with the other members of the audience, and also with the actors on stage whom they watch. Power labels this type of presence “literal presence” and notes that “*spectators* are present in the theatre with the actors and with other spectators” (87).

The physical relationship between the audience and the actors on stage is also important to consider. Different levels of proximity will produce a different affective response. Theatre relies on the presence of bodies on stage, of actors embodying ‘characters’.

However, an audience understands that an actor is playing a fictional role and, with this in mind, as I shall explore later, presence is heightened and complicated when performers present themselves as themselves, eliding their performative persona. For example, in each of my three case studies, the authors feature as a performer in their own work. Their corporeal presence as a shared dramaturgical strategy requires consideration (which I investigate in the corresponding chapters).

A further consideration when thinking about presence as a ‘shared space’ is that a space can be shared with something that is *not* seen, something invisible to the eye. For example, when remembering someone absent, a person may say “I feel their presence with me”: this type of presence is not one that can be literally verified, but it is concerned with intangible feeling.

In theatre, it is not just the space of the auditorium that is shared between the bodies in the room. Actual objects and actors on stage ‘make present’ a fictional place and the characters who inhabit that place. The audience are present with what is literally viewed in front of them, and doubly, these literal objects evoke the presence of imagined places and characters. Two separate ‘presences’ operate at the same time, as Power illustrates: “theatre at once affirms presence by taking place before an audience, while simultaneously putting this correspondence into question: a fictional ‘now’ often coexists in tension with the stage ‘now’” (3-4). As Power outlines, presence appears to rely not only on a shared space, but simultaneously, a shared time. When people sit in a theatre together they are not only experiencing a ‘being in the same place’, but also a ‘being in the same time’: “[t]o be present in a particular place is to be simultaneous with a particular space-time environment” (Power 3). It is presence as a shared time to which I now turn.

1.8.3 *Presence as proximity, a shared time*

Theatre is not only a space of many places, but also a space of many times. There is the literal time experienced by all sat in the theatre, and also the time evoked on the stage. Crucially, ‘presence’ is concerned with temporality: the ‘present’ is that which exists, or occurs, now. Thornton Wilder suggests that “[o]n the stage it is always now; the personages are standing on that razor-edge, between the past and the future, which is the essential character of conscious being; the words are rising to their lips in immediate spontaneity” (Wilder in Goldstone 99). Unlike television, film, or a novel, theatre cannot be turned off or on, muted, rewound, or put down – it unravels in the present moment with its audience, and is therefore

concerned with the ‘now’. Bert O. States considers “the real intimacy of theatre” is created through the immediacy of “being present at its world’s origination under all the constraints, visible and invisible, of immediate actuality” (154). This desire for “immediate actuality”, to share a ‘now’ with others, is what gives theatre, and other live performance, a special charge: if we share a time with others we all share a commonality of experiencing the same moment together. However, whilst some theatre certainly intends to heighten the audience’s awareness of their present selves, not all of theatre operates in this way. Indeed, part of the mission of some theatrical events is the opposite: to take people out of the present moment, into another imagined time/place, to make them forget they are even sat in a theatre. Naturalistic theatre is the genre perhaps most associated with attempting to erase the present ‘now’. Alternatively, the popular form of immersive theatre trades on an immediacy and spontaneity between the spectators and the event: these events intend for their audience to experience the ‘now’ directly. Other work may be set in another time but simultaneously highlights and comments on the present moment. The ‘presentness’ of theatre can therefore easily be disrupted, highlighted, or erased, depending on the effect the theatremaker wishes to have on an audience. The composer and director Heiner Goebbels recognises this disruption of present time that the theatrical event creates through the interplay of its several different time frames:

As long as we as the audience can narcissistically feel reflected in a counterpart, an actor, musician, dancer, we will probably at most be impatient, because the scene pretends a proximity to us, which ultimately cannot be synchronized with our own sense of time. We thus remain, as Gertrude Stein says, ‘either behind or ahead of the play’.
(31)

The multiplicity of time in theatre means that, in relation to theatre of the real, presence is particularly complicated. For an audience watching a play about a particular world event now passed, as though it is happening in the present moment, a temporal distance is created. The presence of real people, places and stories has to be evoked for an audience, due to their absence. Often, theatre of the real productions use the form of direct address. Direct address implies some sort of acknowledgement or highlighting of the ‘present’ relationship between the actors and the audience and it is ‘presence’ as a two-way relationship to which I now turn.

1.8.4 *Presence as reciprocal energy*

Alongside the more literal definition of presence as physically sharing a space and time with another, the *OED* also defines ‘presence’ as something that is more elusive: a “person or thing

that exists or is present in a place but is not seen, esp. a divine, spiritual, or incorporeal being or influence felt or perceived to be present”. This elusive quality of the term is the definition that is strongly connected to the illusionary ‘magic’ of theatre or the ‘stage presence’ of a specific actor. However, the vocal coach Patsy Rodenburg claims that presence can be accessed and to have identified this elusive quality: “[a]ll it is, is energy. Present energy – clear, whole and attentive energy” (xi). However, ‘energy’ itself is an equally elusive quality, though Rodenburg highlights that this ‘presence’ relies on reciprocation: “the moments when your energy fully connected you to the world and you received energy back from that connection” (3). Elinor Fuchs describes this presence as “the circle of heightened awareness flowing from actor to spectator and back [...] the magnetism that a particular performer may exude, what we mean when we say a performer has ‘presence’” (163). Further, and importantly, Rodenburg suggests that presence “is an act of community. It is an act of personal intimacy with others” (12). Some practitioners desire their audience to remain in the dark, whilst others seek this type of co-presence with an audience: both produce alternative effects and it is important to consider why (or why not) practitioners might want to connect to an audience in this way. To offer a practical understanding of presence for her readers, Rodenburg describes “Three Circles of Energy” that “describe the three basic ways human energy moves” (16). First Circle Energy moves “inward” (17), Third Circle Energy is “outward-moving”, and Second Circle Energy is the circle of presence that “moves out toward the object of your attention, touches it and then receives energy back from it” (21).

Critics of contemporary art working in the 1960s explored this idea of reciprocal presence. In his 1967 essay, *Art and Objecthood*, Michael Fried describes the “presence of literalist art” which he relates to “a theatrical effect or quality – a kind of stage presence” (155). Fried highlights the reciprocal nature of this quality, which relies on “the special complicity that that work extorts from the beholder. Something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder take it into account [...]” (155). As Rodenburg considers, this presence is often more easily understood when it is not there at all: “[s]ometimes you understand presence by its very absence. An un-present star on stage means that the audience’s eye refocuses on an actor *with* presence – who may be outshining a Hollywood star who isn’t using ‘It!’” (9). The interplay between presence and absence is crucial and I will now examine this relationship more closely.

1.8.5 *Presence and/in absence*

The presence of one object can highlight the absence of another. For example, the coat on the back of a door can highlight the bodily absence of the owner of that coat. In this way, presence is connected to sensory experience: what we can see (view), touch, hear, smell and taste we are present with. These sensory experiences also remind us of what is absent. One of the most influential deconstructions of presence appears in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. One of the intentions in his book is to "make enigmatic what one thinks one understands" (70) by the word 'presence'. Derrida describes "the structure of the trace" (67) in which he argues

The outside, "spatial" and "objective" exteriority which we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world, as familiarity itself, would not appear without the grammé, without difference as temporalization, without the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present, without the relationship with death as the concrete structure of the living present. Metaphor would be forbidden. (70-71)

Trace, for Derrida, appears to be the *always absent* present – the sign contains a trace of its non-meaning. In other words, an objective 'real' cannot appear without a trace of the 'non-real'. Derrida highlights the importance of the "play" between the presence and absence of the trace – the active relationship between the two. As Marvin Carlson notes, Derrida's poststructuralist theories challenge the aesthetics of presence, but do not simply replace them with an aesthetics of absence:

Derrida's project is rather to suggest a constant field of interplay between these terms, of presence impregnated with absence, a field perpetually in process, always in-between as it is in-between absence and presence. (*Performance* 149)

Derrida's work on presence is considered a landmark intervention in the understanding of this concept: "[a]fter Derrida, theorists and performers acquainted with his (or with related) poststructuralist thought could no longer comfortably embrace the goal of pure presence so attractive to modernism" (Carlson 149). In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida challenges the idea that it is possible to achieve a pure presence in theatre: "[p]resence, in order to be presence and self-presence, has always already begun to represent itself, has always already been penetrated" (249). For Derrida, the "origin is always penetrated" and the desire for presence in theatre is impossible to obtain because theatre operates within a system of representation (248).

If pure presence is impossible, then perhaps absence is achievable. Heiner Goebbels engages with 'absence' in his theatre practice and research. He offers different ideas as to what a "theatre of absence" might involve, including: "the disappearance of the

actor/performer from the centre of attention”, “a de-synchronization of hearing and seeing”, “a separation of the actor’s voices from their bodies” and “an empty stage, i.e. the absence of a central visual focus” (4). Although these suggestions clearly focus on an absence, the editor of Goebbels’ *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theatre* (2015), Jane Collins, is keen to point out that an absence does not necessarily mean an abolition, or disappearance: “Goebbels is not trying to abolish theatrical presence but to redistribute it in ways that bring into being different kinds of perceptual experience” (Collins in Goebbels xix). As Goebbels writes, a theatre of absence can be a liminal space, rather than ‘no’ space: “spaces in-between, spaces of discovery, spaces in which emotion, imagination and reflection can actually take place” (4). Crucially, Goebbels suggests that this theatre relies on a recognition of otherness:

a ‘theatre of absence’ might be able to offer an artistic expression that does not necessarily have to consist in a direct encounter (with the actor), but in an experience through alterity. Alterity is to be understood here not as a direct connection to something but as an indirect and triangular relationship whereby dramatic identification is being replaced by a rather precarious confrontation with a mediating third party, something we might call the ‘other’. (6)

Goebbels’ accentuation of the importance of “alterity” to the theatre he describes – “an indirect and triangular relationship” – is crucial to note. This triangular relationship is how the indexical trace works through substitution, when pointing to the real, which I shall explore later. Elinor Fuchs has written substantially on “an aesthetics of Absence rather than of Presence” and notes that a “theatre of Absence [...] disperses the center, displaces the Subject, destabilizes meaning” (165). Fuchs highlights the popularity of ‘presence’ in relation to actor training in the US, particularly with the 1972 publication of the American director and pedagogue Joseph Chaikin’s book *Presence of the Actor*, but suggests that theatrical presence is now undermined through writing making itself present:

Writing, which has traditionally retired behind the apparent presence of performance, is openly declaring itself the environment in which dramatic structure is situated. The price of this emergence, or perhaps its aim, is the undermining of theatrical Presence. (163)

For Fuchs, the growing importance of the text undermines the idea of spontaneity of speech on stage. This highlights the interplay between presence and absence:

Theatre is ever the presence of the absence and the absence of the presence. [...] One might say that we have been witnessing in contemporary theatre, and especially in performance, a representation of the failure of the theatrical enterprise of spontaneous

speech with its logocentric claims to origination, authority, authenticity - in short, Presence. (172)

Any attempt to try to recapture the diminishing authority of ‘presence’ in the theatre might serve to further repress it. As highlighted when exploring the ‘archive’, the more one tries to make something ‘present’, the more it may slip away.

However, the opposite is also evident, as I have begun to explore: the more one tries to make something absent, the more vividly it appears. The act of eliminating elements of the theatre – of reduction and making certain things absent – can make other things present. Goebbels highlights how other objects become ‘present’ on stage if there is an absence of bodily performers: “things on stage, the means of the theatre and the design elements themselves become protagonists as soon as there is an absence of performers” (28). It is clear there is an ongoing negotiation between presence and absence in theatre and art. One does not replace or outstrip the other, but both exist in continual tension. It is pertinent to consider what devices can be used to highlight this negotiation between presence and absence in theatre, and one of these, I argue, is technology. It is to technology, my final ‘indexical trace of the real’, to which I next turn.

To conclude, in this section I outlined key findings regarding the term ‘presence’. I suggested that presence is commonly understood as referring to the manifest existence of something, but that the term is ambiguous. I explained that presence can be understood as proximity and the act of sharing space with other people and objects. In a similar way, presence can be understood as a proximate sharing of time. Presence is an even more spectral concept than the archive, and as such it is perhaps easier to associate it to the theatre. The multiplicity of spaces and times represented in theatre complicates presence and, in this section, I drew on the seminal work of Cormac Power to outline the relationship between presence and the theatre. Other understandings of presence can be found in the work of Rodenburg, Fuchs and Fried, who all refer to an elusive stage presence, which appears to rely on reciprocity. Finally, I highlighted the connection between absence and presence, referring to Derrida’s deconstruction of presence, Goebbels’ ‘theatre of absence’, and Fuchs’ analysis of the interplay between the two in theatre. The definition of ‘presence’ which I am carrying forward in to the next three chapters encompasses presence as a physical and spectral temporal and spatial coexistence – a reciprocal ‘being-with’ and ‘being-when’.

1.9 Technology

Technology will move in and speak through you, like it or not. Best not to ignore.

– Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments* (95)

In this section I will unravel a few key ideas about technology that will be revisited in the following chapters: a definition of technology; an analysis of human response to technology; a description of how technology increases communication but fosters disconnection; an analysis of whether technology can allow humans to ‘cross’ space and time; and technology’s effect on theatre processes, including how technology can split subjectivity on stage.

The relationship between technology and the theatre requires investigation. Firstly, it is worth analysing how (and if) wider changes in technology impact upon what is shown on the stage, and in what ways. To what extent does technology shape and control the theatrical experience and, further, what theatre is? Secondly, it is important to consider the two opposite discourses of performance: the first is the claim that performance and technology are not mutually compatible, the second is that they are. This debate centres around questions of ‘liveness’ and ‘authenticity’ which I began to explore in the previous section. Finally, how might technology be used in theatre as an indexical trace of the real in performance? For example, if a theatre show is about a specific event and technology is used to play actual audio and visual footage of this event, to what extent does this technology bring the real into the fictional space of the theatre? As mentioned in my discussion of the archive, such technologies can be used to suggest these materials have been transplanted from an external reality and the performative use of them requires attention.

1.9.1 *What is technology?*

Technology is a broad term used to describe the wide variety of processes that enable the development and production of services and goods. The word comes from the Greek τέχνη (techne), which translates as ‘skill’. Technology can either be a literal object, or the underlying systemic knowledge of the technical methods of how something works. The French philosopher Bernard Stiegler offers a useful definition of the broad understanding of technology:

Technology is first of all defined as a discourse on technics. But what does technics mean? In general, technics designates in human life today the restricted and specified domain of tools, of instruments, if not only machines... (93)

Stiegler explains that technics designates “all the domains of skill” and that technics is a hard field to define because it combines both transformations of material into a new product and techniques such as rhetoric, which might not be so obviously productive (93-94):

Technology is therefore the discourse describing and explaining the evolution of specialized procedures and techniques, arts and trades – either the discourse of certain types of procedures and techniques, or that of the totality of techniques inasmuch as they form a system: technology is in this case the discourse of the evolution of that system. (95)

These definitions reveal how problematic it is to offer one blanket definition of technology. Technology is most often discussed in relation to advances in sciences – as something related to mechanisation, opposed to the organic. However Stiegler’s analysis is useful in reminding that physical skills such as dance still require technological work and thinking. Stiegler’s work addresses Martin Heidegger’s famous critique of technology in which he suggests that technology “is a means to an end” and also “a human activity” (4). Heidegger argues that the “two definitions of technology belong together” because “to posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them is a human activity” (4). If technology is intricately related to the human, questions remain as to the content of this relation and I explore some key debates here.

1.9.2 *Technology as something to fear, or to embrace?*

The innovations of technology and the way it appears to easily integrate with human life produces a paradoxical effect, as the science fiction writer and scholar Adam Roberts describes:

Technology is something with which we are simultaneously familiar and already estranged from; familiar because it plays so large a part in our life, estranged from because we don’t really know how it works or what the boffins are about to invent next. (147)

The intelligence of machines has been compared to the intelligence of the human brain. As technological possibilities improve and refine, the gap between human and machine appears to close. Donna Haraway writes that

machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other

distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively and we are disturbingly inert. (152)

As humans become ‘inert’, technology seems to take away the physical labour of everyday life: advances in technology, such as robotic cleaners, take the place once occupied by human labour. However, as technology develops, it becomes condensed and miniaturised – to the point of invisibility. As Haraway considers, “[m]odern machines are quintessentially microelectronic devices: they are everywhere and they are invisible” (153). The invisibility of technology is disconcerting because the more invisible technology becomes, the less understanding and power humans have over it. For example, the cyber is often seen as something to fear and its invisibility dominates this fear: cyberterrorism and cybercrime are rising types of crime, which can result in large-scale attacks and disruption.¹¹ All this might present a dystopic picture: the eradication of the human in favour of the more intelligent and efficient machine. However, benefits of technology are multiple, especially in the area of communication and I will now introduce this issue.

1.9.3 *Technology as connection / disconnection*

Technology bypasses physical distance and separate spaces to allow a commonality of experience and connection. Haraway describes how “we are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system” (161). Over the last thirty years, this movement in information and media technologies has influenced performance practices and the theatre has been responsive to its influence, as argued by Ilter:

Since the 1990s, western theatre has been increasingly interested in the media – forms of communication, social institutions, and ideological tools – and processes of mediatization, due to the growing prevalence of the media in western societies. (‘Rethinking...’ 239)

However, the use of technology in the theatre presents challenges to the ‘live’ nature of performance. Rodenburg argues that technology dulls perceptive senses: “devices that are meant to help connect us with the world [...] serve to isolate us” (14). The criticism of technology as a device that takes us away from experiencing the present moment troubles debates surrounding the ‘live’ experience of theatre. Anything that obviously disturbs the singular spatial and temporal time of ‘now’ in the theatre (such as a voice recording, or video

¹¹ The term ‘cyber’ is commonly used as a prefix to describe activity connected to computer network use. For example, cyberbullying is a form of bullying that occurs on the internet.

projection) presents a challenge to the ‘liveness’ of the theatrical event. This can have two results. Firstly, the irruption of technology in a theatrical event can make ‘real’ objects on stage (the actors, in particular) appear more ‘live’ and unique. On the other hand, the irruption of technology in theatre can remind that theatre, like film and television, is powered and coded through technology. Philip Auslander, who has written extensively about theatre and technological media, suggests it is impossible to separate theatre from our mediatized culture: “[i]t is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media” (40). This is in contrast to Phelan who argues the liveness of performance means it cannot be reproduced – it is a unique event. The scholar and artist Matthew Causey places himself between these two positions: “[d]isputing the argument of Phelan and amending Auslander’s I suggest that the ontology of performance (liveness), which exists before and after mediatization, has been altered within the space of technology” (384). Technology, therefore, has a complicated and vital relationship with our human experience, and with theatre, and I will explore this relationship in further depth in my case studies.

1.9.4 *Technology as split subjectivity*

It is worth briefly addressing Causey’s position as he clearly explains how the use of technology on stage creates split subjectivity. Causey discusses the doubling that occurs when performers and a screened image of themselves appear simultaneously on the stage, “[o]ne image in the process of living, being-unto-death, one image held in abeyance, virtually present” (389). Causey uses the example of screens at a rock concert and suggests the screens are the way in which audiences access the live performer. In this way, Causey argues, “the split video image sourcing from a live feed [...] re-establishes the status of the real” and therefore “the video image is more real than the live actor” (389). Using Lacan’s theories of the scopic field and anamorphosis to further explore the simultaneity of the video and live, Causey suggests that “[t]he aesthetics of the combination of video and live images is a visual metaphor of split subjectivity” and that these “doubling technologies of mediation act as a sparagmos, fragmenting the subject, displaying its fabrication, and remembering what is other” (390). Theatre that engages with technology through performing split subjectivity does more than just create a new aesthetics. For Causey, these are “a symptom or a way of thinking through the transitional phase Western subjectivity is undergoing as a result of mediatization” (393). Technology, in this instance, is seen as a catalyst of a central ontological shift in

Western experience: from experience of the singular, to experience of the fragmentary. Causey suggests that, rather than ignoring the effect of technology on theatre as Phelan does, or overlooking the materiality of the live like Auslander, it is time to conceive “of theatre as a medium that overlaps and subsumes or is subsumed by other media including the television, film, radio, print, and the computer-aided hyper-media” (394).

The overlaps between theatre and media may enforce a split subjectivity that highlights the fragmentary nature of modern life, but it is also important to note that humans can become so entrenched within technological modes that they alter their entire experience of reality. Instead of experiencing a fragmentary existence, technology and the organic can become so fused that it becomes unclear where the boundary between the machine and the human lies. Donna Haraway addresses the consequences of such high-tech culture in *A Cyborg Manifesto*: “[o]ne consequence is that our sense of connection to our tools is heightened. The trance state experienced by many computer users has become a staple of science-fiction film and cultural jokes” (178). Haraway considers how human identity fuses with technology: “[i]t is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine” (177). Such easy disappearance of tools as we use them accounts for how swiftly technology has established itself in human life. Eradication of rigid boundaries and hybridization with technology offers humans the opportunity to exist outside their natural space/time continuum, which I shall now discuss.

1.9.5 *Technology as space and time travel*

Technology provides humans with the chance to cross the physical boundaries of space and time (to a certain extent). The development of communication software and apps such as Skype and Periscope provides people with the experience of access to live visual images and audio of other places whilst accessing these images from another space. This allows people the opportunity to ‘exist’ in multiple spaces at once and hyper-mobility through web-space enables humans to increase their knowledge and understanding of other places, without ever physically travelling to them.

Technology not only grants humans the opportunity to ‘travel’ through space, but also to cross time. It allows archaeologists to discover details about ancient objects and enables historians to produce virtual reconstructions of buildings and people, from rubble and skeletal remains. Furthermore, audio and visual recordings created in the past have the ability to import the past to the present when they are re-visited.

The ability of technology to enable humans to traverse time and space and transport their image and voice to other places is, of course, relevant to theatre, which relies on an element of transportation to fictional times and places. I will now briefly develop my discussion of the relationship between theatre and technology.

1.9.6 *Theatre and technology*

Theatre relies on technology and its effects. Some of this technology can be seen and heard by an audience, whilst some of it, such as the work done backstage by stage management, remains 'invisible'. Some technology is more visible, and several companies intend for its visibility to be a feature of the work. One of these companies is Blast Theory: "[s]ince 1991, we have been using interactive media to create groundbreaking new forms of performance and interactive art that mixes audiences across the internet, live performance and digital broadcasting" (Blast Theory website). Beyond the action of the stage (or non-stage), technology is used in many other ways by theatre audiences: buying tickets, travelling to the theatre and reading reviews online are all experiences that rely on technology.

Advances in technology have created new opportunities for theatre of the real practitioners with the ability to record events, both on audiotape and camera. The processes of archiving rely on technology and the product of this technological archiving can be used in theatre to 'make present' past events. Domietta Torlasco notes the ability for such technology to act as an indexical trace: "[c]inematographic and phonographic recordings can repeat themselves accurately and indefinitely, bringing about the recurrence of the past of which they are the indexical trace" (92). Sontag considers that technology, such as the camera, can offer the objects it captures an immortality, as it freezes them in a specific time and place: "[a]fter the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality" (*On Photography* 11). There are, of course, dangers in conferring static immortality on humans who have grown and changed since the photograph was taken, or the recording has taken place. Subjects are turned into objects and used as objects in this way. Sontag argues that "one of the perennial successes of photography has been its strategy of turning living beings into things, things into living beings" (*On Photography* 98). However, despite this, it is only through technology that theatre is able to represent 'real' people and events from the past. Those who engage with the products of these technologies, in the present moment, are able to connect to something that has already happened. In the theatre, as David Saltz argues, technology "opens up dynamic new possibilities for theatre artists" but

also, “compels us to re-examine some of our most basic assumptions about the nature of theatre and the meaning of liveness” (107). I will explore these assumptions in further depth in relation to my case studies.

To conclude, in this section I explored understandings of the broad term ‘technology’. Technology is a term that describes processes and techniques of a wide range of services and goods. The theatre relies on various technologies which provide a range of ways to heighten aesthetics, and complicate notions of ‘liveness’. The affect of mediatization on contemporary theatre has been analysed by Ilter and Causey, who suggest that performance’s ontology has been altered by technological advancement. Moreover, in theatre, technology can create split subjectivity on stage. Commonly, technology is seen as a tool of connection, which offers humans the opportunity to ‘cross’ space and time through developments in communication software. Finally, I highlighted the dependency of documentary theatre on technology, and explored how technology can act as an indexical trace. The definition of technology that I am carrying forwards to the three case study chapters is that it refers to processes and equipment (mostly mechanical) that offer new visual and audio experiences, and communicative devices. I shall examine technology as a communicative device between performers, and also with their audience. I will be advancing the idea of technology as something that can cross time, by bringing the past to the present (through recorded voices and documentary footage), and cross space (through live footage of other places).

1.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described and challenged Carol Martin’s seminal work on ‘theatre of the real’. My focus in this thesis is to examine the way that the ‘real’ is discursively used in contemporary theatre and how *what comes to be seen* as the ‘real’ is dramatically produced. The chapter highlights that, in contemporary theatre, ‘the real’ has two distinct modes: an ‘intradiegetic real’ which presents ‘the real’ on stage, and an ‘extradiegetic real’ which performs ‘the real’. These two modes use several shared dramaturgical processes through which they construct their varying interpretations of the ‘real’ in theatre and my case study chapters will extrapolate these two approaches. The chapter explained why I term these dramaturgical processes ‘indexical traces of the real’ and introduced the three indexical traces this thesis focuses on: the archive, presence and technology. Discussion of these three indexical traces is deepened in the following chapters relating to each case study.

As I have shown, critics and artists agree that there has been a turn to the real in a range of cultural forms. Within theatre I argue it is no longer *what* the real is that matters, but *how* it functions – the innovative ways in which contemporary theatre deploys certain dramaturgical processes which come to be understood as the real. The following chapter explores the socio-political context within which my case study practitioners work and analyses the defining features of this context that have led to the ‘turn’ to the real across a range of cultural forms. In particular, I explore the key theory of ‘cruel optimism’, as understood by the cultural thinker Lauren Berlant, which I argue is a defining feature of contemporary theatre of the real.

CHAPTER TWO

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS: 2000 – 2018

We have witnessed a radical change as to the experience of the everyday and the at-risk status of human life even in contexts previously treated as safe and in lifestyles typically seen as commonplace.

– Vicky Angelaki (*Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain* 4)

We would rather be ruined than changed
 We would rather die in our dread
 Than climb the cross of the moment
 And let our illusions die.

– W.H. Auden (105)

2.1 Introduction

Chapter One introduced the different modalities of contemporary theatre of the real and outlined the archive, presence and technology, which I argue are three indexical traces of the real to be demonstrated in my case studies. The aim of Chapter Two is to explore the political and economic context of the period 2000 – 2018, highlighting definitive events and movements that shaped the first two decades of the twenty-first century. This foundational work is necessary in order to show that contemporary English theatre highlights and engages with precarity, a state of human existence symptomatic of the lived-experience of this time. In this chapter I also describe two defining moments from the first decade of this century, which shaped the politics, economics and culture that followed: the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 and the 2007 – 8 financial crisis. I explain how these events contributed to the feeling that the post-millennial period is a new “age of anxiety”, a term first coined by W. H. Auden to describe the period after the Second World War (105). This contemporary “anxiety” has been theorised in many ways: from Judith Butler’s exploration of personal vulnerability (*Precarious Life*, 2006), to Isabell Lorey’s investigation into precarious labour (*State of Insecurity*, 2015), to Robert D. Putnam’s description of the societal turn to isolation (*Bowling Alone*, 2000). This chapter introduces some of these interlinked concepts, where necessary. I explain the foundation for these concepts as the economic philosophy of neoliberalism that controls the current socio-political and economic conditions in the West. In the following

remarks, I introduce a discussion of how neoliberal thinking has dominated this time period and its connection to what is labelled ‘precarity’. I turn my attention to introducing different types of precarity, as theorised by Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Isabell Lorey, Guy Standing, and others. I argue that a defining feature of the experience of contemporary Western society is ‘cruel optimism’, a term coined by the cultural thinker Berlant.

2.2 2000 – 2018

The years 2000 – 2018 were characterised by complex political shifts and crises, increased personal threat and an atomisation of lives. Whilst this could be said of any past decade, these two decades have been noted as particularly tumultuous in several key ways. As Vicky Angelaki describes, throughout this period

societies globally have had rather a lot to contend with: watershed political moments; major military conflicts; threats to public safety; a dramatic increase in surveillance mechanisms; the digitization of lives; a social media revolution; a major financial downturn; climate change – and the list continues. (*Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain* 1)

Angelaki collects these many changes to life under the umbrella term ‘crisis’ and suggests crisis “has been a recurring term in the post-2000 period” (1). She claims there are three “interconnected primary areas” of this crisis period: these are “political, environmental”, and “financial” (1). Similarly, Aleks Sierz describes the period since the millennium as one of continual “fear”:

The world of the 2000s was a world of fear. [...] After 9/11, terrorism became a symbol of all the bad stuff in a world full of bad stuff. [...] Fear was the new world order. The idea of extreme risk grew into a new bogeyman, stalking through our lives and casting horrific shadows across our imaginations. (*Rewriting...* 71)

This chapter details how scholars make the case that 2000 – 2018 has been a period characterised by a shift towards feelings of increased fear, uncertainty, vulnerability and responsibility for the individual.

In this chapter, I explain how the 9/11 terror attacks and subsequent ‘War on Terror’, and the 2007 – 8 financial crash and ensuing politics of austerity, are two key phenomena that

impacted on the everyday lives of many people.¹² Only recently, *The Economist* cited them both as the most impactful events of this century:

When historians gaze back at the early 21st century, they will identify two seismic shocks. The first was the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, the second the global financial crisis, which boiled over ten years ago this month with the collapse of Lehman Brothers. ('Has Finance Been Fixed?' 13)

Both of these events and their fallout led to increased precarity, and I will now offer a brief description and analysis of what occurred. Although I do not relate my case studies to them in later chapters, the rationale behind looking at these in more detail is to begin to assess the subjective feelings and societal patterns of behaviour that provide the backdrop to theatre made throughout this time. I argue these are the two events that have most readily shaped English society as precarious, and increased an awareness of the two types of precarity I analyse – existential and societal. It is impossible to give a fully detailed account of these global incidents in what follows, so the focus will be on highlighting some of the theoretical and cultural reactions that marked them as watershed moments.

2.3 9/11 and the War on Terror

On 11 September 2001, four American airliners were hijacked by 19 members of the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda, and crashed at sites across the United States, killing nearly 3000 people. The seismic event of 9/11 has been interpreted as a defining moment of schism in history – there was a *before* 11 September and an *after* 11 September. Enric Monforte suggests the attacks “may be taken as signalling the actual beginning of the new century” (Monforte in Aragay and Middeke 26). Indeed, others consider 9/11 to have altered the experience of time. The American Studies scholar David Holloway construes this moment as one of “historical rupture”, and “an epochal event that drew a clear line through world history, dividing what came after 9/11 from what went before” (1). The common narrative is that, as George Bush claimed, on the evening of 11 September 2001 “night fell on a *different* world” (Bush, my emphasis).

The attacks have been described as a monumental event that shattered people’s confidence in the security of their everyday reality. Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The*

¹² For ease of reading I refer to the terrorist attacks that took place on 11 September 2001 as ‘9/11’ throughout this chapter, the term by which they are commonly known.

Powers of Mourning and Violence (2006) argues 9/11 made many people feel insecure and vulnerable. Jill Dolan names the time since the attacks as “the long moment after September 11” and claims they left the United States “frightened, insecure about our ability to protect ourselves, too scared, some might suggest, to dream of brighter futures” (3). Dolan’s paradoxical description of the time following 9/11 as a “long moment” suggests that 9/11 was a transitional moment in the twenty-first century and, since then, time has contracted into an instant of extending durational trauma.

However, other scholars suggest that the event was not as universally world-changing as it first appeared. David Holloway suggests “in many ways the feeling that everything changed on 9/11 was an illusion” and “life for many continued much as it always had” (1). Joseph Margolis and Tom Rockmore also articulate how 9/11 could be considered either “simply more of the familiar world, a variation on a well-known theme” or “a break with the past, a leap into the unknown”, depending on your circumstantial viewpoint (1). Clare Finburgh writes that she does “not necessarily agree that in 2001 an irrevocable socio-historical rupture took place” (49) and positions herself alongside Jürgen Habermas who suggests that what made 9/11 “new” is the extensive global media coverage (50). In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), Slavoj Žižek also focuses on the media response to 9/11 and explains how the attacks were viewed as a theatrical spectacle, “the stuff of popular fantasies” (17), and that “what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality” (16). Žižek argues that, in the West, such attacks had not been viewed as part of the every day and 9/11 brought these illusory images into people’s reality. Alice O’Grady similarly writes of how technology alters reality in the face of terror: “[s]hared across media platforms instantaneously, the fragility of social infrastructures is brought to the fore and penetrates our collective understanding of world order” (5).

There was a prolific artistic response to the events of 9/11 and its aftermath, and whilst some work created was fictional, many artists drew on verbatim sources.¹³ Several

¹³ For example, in British theatre, plenty of productions explored the subsequent War On Terror and several of these were verbatim pieces, including David Hare’s *Stuff Happens* (2004), Robin Soans’ *Talking To Terrorists* (2005), Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch* (2006) and Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo’s *Guantanamo: Honour Bound to Defend Freedom* (2004). In 2011, ten years after the attacks, Rupert Goold’s company – Headlong – staged *Decade*, nineteen playlets about the attacks and their aftermath. Since 2001, several plays have been produced about US foreign policy, the War on Terror and the military occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mark Ravenhill’s *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2008) was a series of sixteen short plays exploring a range of topics concerning the effects of war. Morgan Lloyd Malcolm wrote *Belongings* (2011), a play about a female soldier returning home from Afghanistan. Caryl Churchill investigated the power relationship between America and the United Kingdom through a metaphorical lens in *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You* (2006).

scholarly books have focused on the artistic response to the post-9/11 period.¹⁴ Hal Foster's *Bad New Days* (2015) analyses some of these artistic responses after 9/11 and suggests that the period has been a time of prolonged crisis: "after 9/11 conditions became even more extreme, as emergency did prove to be more the norm than the exception" (3-4). The 'norm' of emergency has provided much material for theatre practitioners. The theatre scholar Jenny Spencer suggests that:

the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and subsequent U.S.-led wars on terror produced a radically different sociohistorical context in both the United States and Britain for all kinds of politically engaged art, but especially for theatrical performance.
(1)

Indeed, several British theatre scholars suggest that the proliferation of verbatim theatre work throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century has been in direct response to the events of 9/11. Spencer argues that "[d]ocumentary and verbatim theatre provide one of the most prevalent forms of theatre after 9/11" (8). Tomlin notes that "Stephen Bottoms (2006) and Carol Martin (2006) are among those who suggest that the events of 11 September 2001 are central to the subsequent rise in popularity of the verbatim form" (*Acts and Apparitions* 116-117). She observes that Bottoms comments that "the thematic material pertaining to 9/11 and the subsequent political events is particular to the United Kingdom" (117). Indeed, in the article to which Tomlin refers, Bottoms lists significant contributions to the new swathe of documentary theatre and claims "dramatic fiction has apparently been seen as an inadequate response to the current global situation" ('Putting the document...' 57).

The perpetuating narrative of 9/11 is that it irrevocably changed the globalised Western world. The wide range of cultural responses to the event suggests artists consider it a pivotal moment in recent history. 9/11 was the first major event of the twenty-first century that destabilised personal security in the West. The incident revealed that Western reality – or the narrative of a reality – was no longer completely stable. On 12 September 2001, those in the West woke up to a world that seemed, for many, to be increasingly insecure. In this way, for some, 9/11 shaped the experience of the start of the new millennium, and shaped what followed.

2.4 The 2007 – 8 financial crash

¹⁴ These works include: Jenny Spencer's *Political and Protest Theatre After 9/11: Patriotic Dissent* (2012); Daniel O'Gorman's *Fictions of the War on Terror* (2015); Hal Foster's *Bad New Days* (2015); Charlie Lee-Potter's *Writing the 9/11 Decade: Reportage and the Evolution of the Novel* (2017); David Holloway's *9/11 and the War on Terror* (2008), and Alex Danchev's *On Art and War and Terror* (2009).

In 2007, following a crisis in the US subprime mortgage market, Europe experienced a debt crisis and Britain entered the phase of the ‘credit crunch’, a time of severe shortage of credit and money. The British bank Northern Rock was critically affected: on 14 September 2007 large numbers of its customers queued across the country in order to withdraw their money. This was “the first bank run in Britain since 1866” and directly led to the eventual collapse of Northern Rock (‘The Bank That Failed’ *The Economist*). In 2010, David Cameron and Nick Clegg’s coalition government implemented austerity measures to combat the crisis, and at present, in 2018, the so-called ‘austerity’ programme in the UK continues.

The financial crisis destabilised widely held narratives about the infallibility of the banking system. In Katy Shaw’s analysis of literature’s response to the events, *Crunch Lit* (2015), she explains how the financial crash shattered these trusted narratives:

Before 2007, the banking system was a form of fiction, a myth which was widely believed. The story generally went like this: the bank, a physical place that was known and trusted, took customers’ money, [and] kept it safe [...] This fictional system was based on a long-gone relationship, one that the public were happy to believe and, along with the banks, were guilty of perpetuating. (x-xi)

It is debatable that before 2007 “the public were happy to believe” in the security of the financial system: the previous collapse of the Enron Corporation, along with UK recessions throughout the 1980s and 1990s, had exposed this “myth”. However, the 2007 – 8 crash was particularly noteworthy for the UK because it was the most prominent financial disaster for over a decade. As Shaw suggests, many people relied on the stability of the financial system and the credit crunch viscerally exposed its instability. The unmasking of financial security “showed the general public that the stories about finance in which they had invested their trust were false” (Shaw xi). Clara Escoda suggests this increased precarity in Western society: “[t]he notion of precarity has acquired primary importance, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis, which has put an end to any sense of security in Western societies” (Escoda in Aragay and Middeke 124).

Thomas Docherty argues that the financial collapse impacted upon culture:

My contention is that some fundamental economic relations that shape our advanced societies have changed since the financial crisis of 2007 – 8; and that this has had a major impact on culture and, within that, on literature and on how we evaluate those forms of languages and letters that we currently identify as ‘literary’. (10)

Indeed, the credit crunch provided rich pickings for theatre writers and artists. Louise Owen

suggests “arguably the most high profile” plays from 2009 that tackled the financial crisis “were [David] Hare’s *The Power of Yes* and [Lucy] Prebble’s *Enron*” (108). *The Power of Yes* is a part-verbatim piece that features an actor playing ‘The Author’, a figure taken to represent Hare who attempts to “set out to find out what happened” through interviewing important figures (Hare 3). *Enron* is a fictional piece based on the collapse of Enron, the American energy corporation.¹⁵ It is notable that both these writers were quick to respond artistically to the crash, though Prebble suggests she had been writing *Enron* for some time and would “be a liar to say” she “saw the credit crunch coming” (Cavendish).

The impact of 2007 – 8 was recognised as an event that destabilised everyday life. Before the crisis, it was considered reasonable to trust in the security of money and stability of the banking system as *The Economist* suggests, with reference to Mervyn King (then Governor of the Bank of England):

Nobody trusts politicians. Regulators are always disliked. But central bankers are held to a higher standard; which is why Mr King is the past week’s main victim. He has lost credibility; and a central banker without credibility is not much use. (*The Economist*)

The crisis revealed that any belief in the credibility of the banking system was an illusion. The queues at Northern Rock banks in September 2007 sent a clear message: people no longer felt their money was secure, or trusted in monetary institutions. It was not only a sense of mistrust in the banks that the crisis provoked: belief in the monetary system itself was revealed as deeply flawed and precarious. Shaw explains that money’s instability is key to its power: “[m]oney is so complicated because it operates as a symbol, a representation of both a concept and an ideology. The source of value in money lies elsewhere, it is always spectral” (Shaw 1). The representational qualities of money are key: money is simply a sign of something else and, in this way, money – like the indexical traces of the real I explore – is something that is indexical.

I will now turn attention to analysing the condition of neoliberalism and how it relates to the precarity that has instantiated in the wake of both 9/11 and the financial crash.

2.5 Neoliberalism

¹⁵ The financial crisis and politics of austerity continue to be a powerful attraction for dramatists: in 2015 Lung Theatre created *E15*, a verbatim piece about cuts affecting housing, and in 2018 *The Lehman Trilogy* opened at the National Theatre, a three-part epic about the creation and collapse of the financial firm Lehman Brothers.

‘Neoliberalism’ is a term that has become the popular description for political and social ideas and policies that pervade the Western-world. Matthew Eagleton-Price notes that neoliberalism “has become a popular but problematic term to characterise our age” (xiii), and Cahill states that “a pronounced trend has been to insist that the concept should not be or cannot be neatly defined” (5). The expression is most readily used by those on the Left, to admonish ideas behind liberal capitalist principles that have led to inequality and hardship. As Boas and Gans-Morse state, “one rarely sees it used as a good word [...] a compelling indicator of the term’s negative connotation is that virtually *no one* self-identifies as a neoliberal, even though scholars frequently associate others – politicians, economic advisors, and even fellow academics – with this term” (140).

I offer here a brief description of this complex term, as I will return to the philosophy of neoliberalism and its consequences throughout my following chapters. Although written more than ten years ago, David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) remains a key text in the understanding of the inherent principles of the idea. Harvey offers a broad definition of neoliberalism:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (2)

Harvey explains the prevalence of neoliberal ideology and its popularisation in the West by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, followed by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair (and now by the respective US and UK incumbent governments). The decade before my study starts, the 1990s, was one of the flourishing periods of neoliberalism: Cahill suggests that by the 1990s “neoliberalism had become a dominant policy norm in many countries” (45) and Steger claims that in “its heyday during the 1990s, neoliberalism bestrode the world like a colossus” (x).

Key to understanding the theory of neoliberalism is its focus on recognising the individual’s unrestricted ‘freedom’, which goes hand in hand with a release of centralised government control. Harvey describes this as the “neoliberal determination to transfer all responsibility for well-being back to the individual” (76). Eagleton-Price recognises that the “term ‘responsibility’, particularly in association with ‘individual’, has become common in the context of neoliberalism, with frequent use by politicians and moral guardians” (156). However, Eagleton-Price also highlights neoliberalism’s connection to the financial world, noting that “one of the most distinctive and controversial features of the neoliberal period has

been the increasing power of financial institutions” (68). Steger brings together the various ways to understand neoliberalism when he notes that:

‘Neoliberalism’ is a rather broad and general concept referring to an economic model or ‘paradigm’ that rose to prominence in the 1980s. Built upon the classical liberal ideal of the self-regulating market, neoliberalism comes in several strands and variations. Perhaps the best way to conceptualize neoliberalism is to think of it as three intertwined manifestations: (1) an ideology; (2) a mode of governance; (3) a policy package. (11)

Like most political theories, neoliberalism has positive and negative effects, and unpacking the full detail of these is beyond the remit of this chapter. What is central to my interest is how quickly neoliberalism has become the prevalent default *modus operandi* in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Johnston and Saad-Filho claim that today, “[w]e live in an age of neoliberalism. [...] In less than one generation, neoliberalism has become so widespread and influential, and so deeply intermingled with critically important aspects of life, that it can be difficult to assess its nature and historical importance” (1). As Harvey recognised in 2005:

Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world. (Harvey 3)

Neoliberalism has inspired many political projects in UK politics – from Ed Miliband’s ‘One Nation Labour’, to David Cameron’s ‘Big Society’, and recently Theresa May’s ‘shared society’.¹⁶ Such political enterprises advocate for the devolution of powers to local government and suggest responsibility for the upkeep of societal institutions should fall to individuals. Globally, the failure of Hillary Clinton to win the US presidency and the vote to leave the European Union in 2016 is considered by some to be a backlash against similar neoliberal capitalist policies and the economic crises resulting from the implementation of such policy.¹⁷

¹⁶ On 19 July 2010, David Cameron launched the coalition government’s “huge culture change” – the concept of the “Big Society”. As Cameron articulated, this model for society devolves a considerable amount of responsibility for societal conservation to individuals, away from government: the “success of the Big Society will depend on the daily decisions of millions of people – on them giving their time, effort, even money, to causes around them” (Cameron 2010). ‘Big Society’ was such a pervasive term throughout this period that it was named Oxford Dictionaries’ word of the year in 2010 (Wainwright).

¹⁷ For reference to Hillary Clinton see Naomi Klein’s ‘It was the Democrats’ embrace of neoliberalism that won it for Trump’, *The Guardian*, 9 Nov 2016, and also George Monbiot’s ‘Neoliberalism: the deep story that lies beneath Donald Trump’s triumph’, *The Guardian*, 14 Nov 2016. For reference to Brexit see *Guilty Men* by “Cato the Younger” (2017) pp. 19-20, 128; Mather, Andrew, *Brexit: Why We Won* (2016) p. 17, 24, 34; Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin and Paul Whiteley, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (2017) p. 2, pp. 146-174; Shipman, Tim, *All Out War: The Full Story of Brexit* (2017) pp. 563-612.

2.6 The ‘boom’ years - New Labour and pre-austerity Britain

The New Labour government were in power from 1997 – 2010. During this time, particularly in the early years, the UK experienced “ten years of continuous and steady growth” (Sinclair 186) and “economic resurgence” (Seldon 648), and it is characterised as a decade “of unbroken economic growth” (Lee 187), and “the decade of mega-deals and mega-growth” (Stiglitz ix). Kavangh describes Tony Blair’s contribution as “a successful Prime Minister, who has set a new path for the public services and leaves Britain a better place than when he found it in 1997” (3). Taylor attributes this to the situation that Blair had inherited: “in May 1997 Blair and Brown were the fortunate beneficiaries of a British economic revival that had first begun under the Conservatives in the autumn of 1992” (222 – 223). In accepting what they had inherited from the Conservatives, rather than rejecting it, “New Labour embraced the neo-liberal capitalist order, not in a defensively apologetic way but with a real sense of pride and swagger” (Taylor 126).

According to Simon Lee, the focus of New Labour’s economic approach “was overwhelmingly consumer-led and borrowing-driven” (31). This required the government to embrace competitive global markets, and encourage individual effort. For Mullard and Swaray, this focus on the individual is one of the key characteristics of the Blair years: “[p]ower no longer belonged to organizations but to individuals able to sell their ideas. [...] The Blair governments have therefore embraced the concept of the individual, [...] and the role of government is therefore limited to providing contexts for market-based opportunities” (48).

Throughout this decade, individuals were offered opportunities to expand their wealth as both producers and consumers. As Eagleton-Price describes, “[e]asier access to credit - including mortgages, credit cards, student loans and car loans – is a defining feature of the neoliberal period. Such trends have led to elevated levels of household debt” (71). Lee outlines how the financial system offered opportunities for consumers to borrow beyond their means:

Consumers had taken advantage of the opportunities offered by liberalized and deregulated financial and property markets to borrow record amounts of money, set against the rising value of assets – notably house prices and share values. [...] Where once home-buyers would have been limited to borrowing up to three times their current salary, it was now possible for them to borrow up to six times their salary. (31)

However, this unprecedented growth could not continue to expand exponentially, as recognised by Ann Pettifor whose 2006 book *The Coming First World Debt Crisis*, predicted the financial crisis that followed.

2.7 The ‘bust’ years - the age of austerity

Louise Owen’s analysis of plays about the financial crisis introduced me to the work of Ann Pettifor. Owen draws attention to Pettifor’s prediction, writing that, “[i]n *The Coming First World Debt Crisis* (2006), economist and debt-relief campaigner Ann Pettifor made a frightening prediction” (107) and that “[a] decade on, Pettifor’s analysis takes on the bitter character of tragic irony” (108). In Pettifor’s book, she “foresees a time, in the not too distant future, when the so-called First World will be mired in the levels of debt that have wreaked such havoc on the economies of so-called Third World economies since the 1980s” (1). Pettifor’s book “is completed at a time (spring 2006) when stock markets in both the US and UK are booming” (1) and she notes that that by “borrowing, shopping, and buying and selling houses” consumers “are also inflating bubbles – in stocks and shares; in property and in other assets” (2).

In this thesis, I discuss the link between precarity and the destabilisation of the real, and Pettifor’s work highlights how changes in finance and industry have created a move away from the ‘material’ and ‘real’, towards insecurity: “[t]he book examines the re-engineering of the global economy – away from the ‘real’ productive sectors of making and growing things – and towards the unproductive finance sector in which money is gambled, compounded and multiplied” (3). In her suggestions for the future of the global economy, Pettifor is especially concerned that the ‘unreal’ nature of money should be considered more readily: “[t]he ethics of lending and borrowing should take into account the ‘unnatural’ or ‘fictionalized’ nature of money” (138). As Pettifor predicted, the financial crash occurred in 2007 – 8, and significantly affected countries around the world.

The term that has accompanied the period following the financial crisis is ‘austerity’. Guy Standing’s *A Precariat Charter* (2014) notes that governments everywhere “backed by international financial agencies, decided to impose ‘austerity’ on their populations to pay for the profligacy they had promoted” (41). Mirowski similarly notes that austerity “became the watchword in almost every country; governments everywhere became the scapegoats for dissatisfaction of every stripe, including that provoked by austerity” (2). In *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, Mirowski explains the 2007 – 8 financial crash negatively

impacted on people with “the collapse of what remained of manufacturing employment, the reduction of whole neighborhoods to bombed-out shells, the evaporation of pensions and savings accounts, the dismay of witnessing the hope of a better life for our children shrivel up” (1). For Mirowski, these changes directly correlated with feelings of insecurity, particularly in left-leaning circles: “[i]n 2010, we were ushered into a grim era of confusion and perplexity on the left” (2). I will now look in more detail at this insecurity, and analyse how neoliberalism connects to precarity.

2.8 Neoliberalism and precarity

Several scholars have linked the experience of the financial crisis and, neoliberalism more widely, to feelings of insecurity that followed. Guy Standing notes that “[p]overty and economic insecurity great sharply in the austerity era” (*A Precariat Charter* 57). However Standing also suggests that “an existential crisis” followed the crash:

The neo-liberal model was a crude version of Darwinian competition, based on ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. It eschewed values such as compassions, empathy and solidarity, and preached individualism, competitiveness, meritocracy and commodification. This ideological break, initiated by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, created an epidemic of stress, fear and insecurity among the precariat and those close to it. (*A Precariat Charter* 39 - 40)

For Standing, the “neo-liberal model generates chronic uncertainty” and for the precariat “uncertainty is pervasive: Where will the next shock come from? Will I need assistance or a loan? What will happen if I lose my job or fall sick?” (*A Precariat Charter* 382). Cahill and Konings recognise the same insecurity when noting that “the neoliberal reconfiguration of power relations is not simply about material distribution but equally about the growth of insecurity [...] it is perfectly possible to have played by all the rules, yet still be faced with the prospect of several decades of debt” (24 – 25). Mirowski similarly asserts how the financial crisis “has not only wrought the economic insult mutely suffered by so many; it has also inflicted a breakdown in confidence that we can adequately comprehend the system within which we are now entrammeled” (1). These scholars seem to recognise a connection between societal precarity and existential precarity.

Following the crash, David Cameron asserted that collective public effort was needed to repair society and schemes such as the ‘Big Society’ were promoted as an attempt to ‘fix’ fractures in British society. Cameron suggested the scheme was about

“social recovery as well as economic recovery” because “there are too many parts of our society that are broken” (2011). The ‘broken’ society is considered to be symptomatic of a contemporary existence (particularly urban existence) characterised by isolation and disconnection. The disconnected modern life has been a particular focus of scholarship since the millennium. Robert D. Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) reviews civic engagement in twentieth-century America, and suggests “we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century” (27). Key to Putnam’s inquiry is his somewhat ironically neoliberal analysis that the solution to these problems lies firstly with the individual, not the institution, and suggests institutional reform “will not happen – unless you and I, along with our fellow citizens, resolve to become reconnected with our friends and neighbors” (414). This example of communitarian thought has been a recent focus of British culture and politics, as schemes such as the ‘Big Society’ reveal. Eagleton-Price notes how “the theme of individual responsibility resurfaced in the rhetoric of all prime ministers over the neoliberal period” and offers “David Cameron’s appeal to volunteerism” as one of the examples (157). The interest in the positive societal benefits of what Putnam terms “social capital” (22) has grown in the UK and authors such as Charles Leadbeater argue that participation – “a capacity to share and then combine our ideas” will be key to societal success (6). However, despite their aims, such schemes have so far failed to address the widespread isolated nature of modern society and the endemic culture of loneliness it has produced. At the heart of this culture is the isolated ‘precariat’, as described by British scholar Guy Standing: “[to] be precariatized is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle” (*The Precariat* 16). Standing suggests that there is a connection between precarity and identity, and this neoliberal subjectivity will be more fully examined in my later chapters.

It is important to outline a few of the different ways of understanding precarity and how these theorisations are related, as I will draw on them throughout this thesis. The similar terms ‘precarity’ and ‘precarious’ are distinct from each other, as Marissia Fragkou helpfully distinguishes. With reference to Isabell Lorey and Judith Butler, she chooses ‘precarity’ for her book’s title in order to “foreground the material conditions that facilitate and maintain the uneven distribution of vulnerability and management of precarious life” (6). In this thesis, I use the phrase ‘existential precarity’ to describe the general human precariousness to the Other as theorised by Butler, and ‘social precarity’ to describe the

“material conditions” which Fragkou analyses, as theorised by Berlant and Lorey. Using ‘precarity’ for both, as opposed to ‘precarity’ and ‘precariousness’ reinforces the interconnectedness of the two, as this thesis explores.

Judith Butler is the most well-known thinker who has written on precarity post-9/11, though others have contributed significantly to the debate. Several books are recently published, or forthcoming, on the relationship between precarity and theatre, which indicates the current importance of this idea in theatrical discourse. Marissia Fragkou’s recently published *Ecologies of Precarity in Twenty-First Century Theatre: Politics, Affect, Responsibility* (2018) “navigate[s] the interface between precarity and theatre” (183), and Jenn Stephenson’s *Insecurity: Perils and Products of Theatres of the Real* will be published in 2019.

In 2012, an edition of *The Drama Review* was dedicated to precarity, edited by Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider. Mireia Aragay and Martin Middeke’s *Of Precariousness: Vulnerabilities, Responsibilities, Communities in 21st-Century British Drama and Theatre* (2017) is a collection that emerged from several research projects and groups, and the work of contributors to the volume intersects with several concerns of this thesis, including chapters on verbatim theatre and the work of Tim Crouch.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2006), Butler collates five essays that assess the period after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. She suggests that what followed the attacks was a condition “of heightened vulnerability and aggression” (xi), and that the violence of 9/11 highlighted a shared interdependent vulnerability: “[o]ne insight that injury affords is that there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know” (xii). Butler claims the awareness of intensified vulnerability in relation to others is now a feature of our contemporary existence. However, it is not only increased vulnerability to the Other that Butler recognises as a condition of life in the West: she explains that, alongside increased vulnerability, there is an increased ethical responsibility towards the Other.

This strand of Butler’s argument stems from the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of the ‘face’ and she explains that she uses Levinas’ work “to explain how it is that others make moral claims upon us, address moral demands to us, ones that we do not ask for, ones that we are not free to refuse” (131). The Levinasian notion of the ‘face’ centres on responsibility: that the Other makes an ethical demand upon us. In his essay ‘Peace and Proximity’, Levinas describes the face as “the extreme precariousness of the other” (Levinas 140). Butler suggests Levinas’ philosophy is an ethical philosophy, because of its focus on the

experience of the Other: “[t]o respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself. [...] It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other” (134).

Levinas suggests that responsibility to the “face” is primarily concerned with an awareness of the Other’s death. The face “is the other before death, looking through and exposing death” (Levinas in Butler 131). This theory goes further than simply to highlight mortality. Levinas appears to suggest that the “face” is connected to alleviation from a lonely death: “the face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. Thus the face says to me: you shall not kill” (Levinas in Butler 131-132). The command “you shall not kill” presents a puzzle that Butler attempts to untangle in her work. She explains that Levinas’ theory of the “face” appears to present a contradiction, when he argues: “the face of the other in its precariousness and defenselessness, is for me both the temptation to kill *and* the call for peace” (Levinas 141, my emphasis). Butler asks a series of pertinent questions to try and understand this statement:

Why would it be that the very precariousness of the Other would produce for me the temptation to kill? Or why would it produce the temptation to kill at the same time that it delivers a demand for peace? Is there something about my apprehension of the Other’s precariousness that makes me want to kill the Other? Is it the simple vulnerability of the Other that becomes a murderous temptation for me? (134-135)

Although Butler does not provide clear answers, she recognises that this “struggle” is at the centre of Levinas’ theory of the face, and suggests it is this tension that makes the theory ethical: “the face operates to produce a struggle for me, and establishes this struggle at the heart of ethics” (135). Butler suggests that the “voice” which provokes both killing and peace is not an entirely human voice, nor your own voice, but akin to the voice of God who says “Thou shalt not kill” (135). I shall draw on the responsibility to the Other in the face of death in the following chapters.

Just as Angelaki highlights that there are three key areas of contemporary ‘crisis’ (“political, environmental” and “financial” (1)), there are several different types of precarity. People are precarious from being proximate to others and their indeterminate actions as Butler highlights and bodies are precarious in their vulnerability to injury and death. In *Frames of War* (2009), Butler develops her thinking of precarity and outlines “precariousness” as “a generalized condition whose very generality can be denied only by denying precariousness itself” (22). Ridout and Schneider suggest that precarity “has become a byword for life in late and later capitalism – or, some argue, life in capitalism *as usual*” (5).

This understanding of precarity is one that considers it as the continual condition of a precarious “lifestyle” as Guy Standing articulates, produced by the economics of neoliberal capitalism (*The Precariat* 16). It is useful here to explain in a little more detail what Standing means by the ‘precariat’ in order to demonstrate why it is an exemplar figure of precarity, created by neoliberalism. In *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Standing describes “a new group in the world, a class-in-the-making” (xv), “an incipient political monster” created by “the very success of the ‘neo-liberal’ agenda” (1). Standing defines the group as “people who lack the seven forms of labour-related security” (11), which include employment security (e.g. “regulations on hiring and firing”), skill reproduction security (e.g. “employment training”) and work security (e.g. “limits on working time”) (12). Central to the precariat is precarious labour conditions – they are “subject to chronic uncertainty” (25). One of Standing’s key arguments is that it is not a homogenous group and it “does not consist of people with identical backgrounds” (103). In his follow up book *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens* (2014) Standing identifies “three varieties of precariat” (29). Firstly, “people bumped out of working class communities”; secondly, “migrants, Roma, ethnic minorities, asylum seekers [...] some of the disabled and [...] ex-convicts”; and thirdly, “the educated, plunged into precariat existence”, which is the fastest-growing variety (29-30). In short, “[f]alling into the precariat could happen to most of us” (*The Precariat* 69), which is why we should take notice of it. Notably, and in relation to my work in Chapter One on the temporality of the archive and presence, each of these varieties of precariat relates to experiences of the past, present and future: “the first part of the precariat experiences deprivation relative to a real or imagined past, the second relative to an absent present, an absent ‘home’, and the third relates to a feeling of having no future” (30-31).¹⁸

In *A Precariat Charter*, Standing defines the precariat “by ten features” (28) and develops ideas put forward in the last chapter of *The Precariat* – ‘A Politics of Paradise’ – which looks towards the potential future for the precariat. *A Precariat Charter* attempts “to formulate an agenda for the precariat that could be the basis of a political movement” and “respond to reactions to *The Precariat*” (x). He suggests a ‘Precariat Charter’ of twenty-nine articles in which he proposes “policies and institutional changes” that “correspond to the need to revive the great trinity of freedom, fraternity and equality from the precariat’s perspective” (150). Standing repeats his assertion that the precariat is growing, stating that “numbers are

¹⁸ As demonstrated in my brief discussion of 9/11, precarity is often considered to destabilise time. For example, Ridout and Schneider suggest that precarity “is life lived in relation to a future that cannot be propped securely upon the past. Precarity undoes a linear streamline of temporal progression and challenges ‘progress’ and ‘development’ narratives on all levels” (5).

multiplying, so that however hard they try, establishments cannot deny the existence of the precariat or what it stands for” (381). He argues that “a new progressive strategy” is needed “orientated to the needs, aspirations and insecurities of the precariat” (92, 93).

The subtitle of Standing’s first book on the precariat is ‘*A New Dangerous Class*’ and in *A Precariat Charter* he indicates that the issue of whether or not “the precariat is a class” occupied readers of the book (x) and accepts that critics may claim his notion is too vague “as if that were not true of ‘the working class’ or ‘the idle class’” (28). In this second book he explains the descriptor more fully, claiming that those in the precariat “have distinctive relations of production, relations of distribution (sources of income) and relations to the state, but not yet a common consciousness or a common view of what to do about precarity” (31). Standing explains that the precariat is ‘dangerous’ because “its class interests are opposed to the mainstream political agendas of the twentieth century, the neo-liberalism of the mainstream ‘right’ and the labourism of social democracy” (31) and due to its composition of different varieties of people it is “at war with itself” (32). Further, the anger and stress experienced by the precariat has and will lead to increased riots, illness and violence (32).

What is important to note about Standing’s understanding of the precariat is that he uses it as an example to argue that precarity is more than just a social situation. It is a unifying identity that has formed a new and evolving class, with transgressive potential:

Precariousness (or ‘precarity’, as some prefer) is more than a ‘social condition.’ A social condition cannot act. Only a social group with common or compatible aims can do that. One way of expressing the claim underlying both books is that the precariat is a class-in-the-making that must become a class-for-itself in order to seek ways of abolishing itself. This makes it transformative, unlike other existing classes, which want to reproduce themselves in a stronger way. (xi)

The idea that there has been the development of a new class which does not seek reinforcement because its common characteristic is precarity has been explored by other theorists. The political theorist Isabell Lorey has written substantially about the condition of a precarious class that Standing describes. In *State of Insecurity* (2015) Lorey describes “precarization” as “not a marginal phenomenon, even in the rich regions of Europe” and “not an exception, it is the rule” which dictates “living with the unforeseeable, with contingency” (1). Lorey argues that in the twenty-first century, precarity has become the lived norm:

In the 2000s it becomes obvious that for cultural producers and knowledge workers, because of freedom and autonomy in comparison with full employment, self-chosen precarious living and working conditions are no longer ‘alternative,’ resistant, or

unusual to the majority of workers. [...] Short-term, insecure, and low-wage jobs, often named ‘projects,’ are becoming normal for the bigger part of society: precarization is in a process of normalization. (Lorey in Puar: 164)

Jasbir Puar suggests that Lorey’s “incisive analysis of the precarization of middle-class labor [...] alters the temporal and relational forms of economic stratification and thus changes not only who identifies as, say, middle class, but what that identification now means” (163). The collapse of various forms of identity is something that Standing argues is a feature of the precariat: the “lack of an occupational identity or narrative to give to life” (22). This suggests that precarious circumstance feeds into an even wider existential precarity concerning the ontological instability of identity and the everyday real.

Aragay and Middeke highlight that other theorists offer differing useful understandings of such ‘precarity’, especially the poststructuralists, and in particular, Jacques Derrida:

The poststructuralist ethics of Jacques Derrida have focused on equivocal issues such as undecidability, the – truly precarious – responsibility to the Other, and indeed on the aporias which are inherent to such concepts as ‘the gift’, ‘forgiveness’ or ‘mourning’ (4).

It is important to note again that the relationship with ‘the Other’ is central to a definition of precarity, as this is an idea my case study chapters will elucidate. The next section explores Lauren Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism that articulates how and why many people choose to believe in an enduring stability, even when this stability is revealed to be an illusion.

2.9 Cruel Optimism

This section introduces the scholar and cultural thinker Lauren Berlant’s theory of ‘cruel optimism’ and critiques of this theory. Berlant’s field of research is focused on culture and politics: in particular, the relationship between social modes and affect in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the US. Although this is a US-centred theory, I delineate how this applies to a UK context and offer examples of why cruel optimism is a key undercurrent of contemporary politics and society.

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011) Berlant suggests that, in the West, people form optimistic attachments to a wide variety of objects:

It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. (1)

Berlant suggests that these attachments can become cruel “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). She explains that the human desire for certain things and attachments to specific ideas or objects is “not inherently cruel” (1). Rather, they “become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (1). Crucially, one of the facets of cruel optimism is its primary concern with the ongoing relation between the aim and the object: “[c]ruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (24). The ‘cruelty’ is derived from continual maintenance of this relation, despite its content: “it is cruel insofar as the very pleasure of being inside a relation [is] sustaining regardless of the content of the relation” (2). The disregard for the content of the relation in favour of the experience of the relation produces a contradictory effect. It seems implausible to feel sustained by something that is damaging, but this is what Berlant suggests is the condition of cruel optimism: “a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat, that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming” (2). Dependency is key to the structure of cruel optimism.

Berlant offers a variety of instances of cruel optimism from literature, film, art and political projects to analyse how these relations manifest in contemporary life. She investigates why people hold on to optimistic fantasies when there is multiple evidence that these fantasies are unhealthy; she also considers what happens when these fantasies crumble. The examples Berlant uses can make the thread of her argument difficult to follow at times. Indeed, in his review of the book, Will Cooley complains that “the book is maddening, occasionally enlightening, and often plain confusing” (79); he suggests that Berlant’s middle-class standpoint will do little to end the oppression she describes: “[i]f critical theorists such as Berlant want to contribute to ending oppression [...] they might want to meet workers on their level, and not in the contemptuous abstract” (80). However, Simone Roberts suggests that “most admirable about her work is the kindness with which she writes it” and that her writing always shifts “to clauses of compassion for all of us living through” the condition of cruel optimism (384). I agree with Roberts: whilst some of the text confuses, Berlant does not write in the overtly patronising way Cooley describes.

At its heart, cruel optimism is connected to ‘presentness’ and how to consider the crisis of life in the present moment. However, Berlant makes explicit that her theory and the

temporality it inhabits is distinct from the type of crises characteristic of trauma theory that have been developed by Cathy Caruth, Giorgio Agamben, and others who – she claims – consider trauma as “what happens to persons and populations as an effect of catastrophic impacts” (10). Stef Craps asserts “the concept of trauma is widely used to describe responses to extreme events across space and time, as well as to guide their treatment” (48). As Berlant articulates, “trauma theory conveniently focuses on exceptional shock and data loss in the memory and experience of catastrophe” and describes “the historical present as the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life” (10). Berlant turns attention to the idea that trauma is not exceptional, but the ongoing condition of precarity in the present, a “notion of systemic crisis” (10). Her aim is to “think about trauma as a genre for viewing the historical present” (9) and make the case that it is “a process embedded in the ordinary” (10).¹⁹ Cruel optimism is concerned with viewing the traumatic present from within the present, as Berlant describes:

The historical sense with which Cruel Optimism is most concerned involves conceiving of a contemporary moment from within that moment. One of the book’s central claims is that the present is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back. (4)

She argues that, rather than the present being simply a unit of time, or an object, it is a “mediated affect”, “a thing that is sensed and under constant revision” and what she labels “the impasse” (4). The “impasse”, Berlant suggests, is “a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic” (4). Berlant explores the “stretched-out present” alongside developing aesthetic genres “for describing the activity of being reflexive about a contemporary historicity as one lives it” (5).

The act of reflecting on a moment from within that moment is a difficult and contradictory task, as my previous chapter’s work on the ‘archive’ began to elucidate. Indeed, the notion of archival construction is important to cruel optimism and Berlant highlights how her perspective develops from “Raymond Williams’s incitement to think about the present as a process of emergence” (7). Williams designated “*structures of feeling*” to describe the way to characterise a cultural moment and his work is widely recognised as the precursor to today’s affect studies (132). The extensive work undertaken by Williams on this matter

¹⁹ The viewpoint that trauma is not a singular unique event has not altogether been circumvented by trauma theorists, but certainly could do with more prominence, as Craps argues: “[d]ominant conceptions of trauma have also been criticized for considering trauma as an individual phenomenon and distracting attention from the wider social situation” (49-50).

appears in *Marxism and Literature*, in which he notes that in “most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in an habitual past tense” (128). He considers this a “reduction of the social; to fixed forms” and calls it an “error” (128). Williams considers that the alternative to this rigidity of past-tense description is “a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange” (131). As Williams conceives it, he observes the slight differences between generations: “no one generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessors” (131). Instead, he clarifies that the changes he discusses are “something quite general, over a wide range, and the description that often fits the change best is the literary term ‘style’” (131). He contends that this process is reflected in many different areas, “observed in manners, dress, building, and other similar forms of social life” (131). This all-encompassing characterisation is so wide-reaching it appears somewhat vague, but it does usefully draw attention to the all-pervasiveness of this particular process.

What is especially pertinent to my study of indexical traces of the real in contemporary performance is Williams’ reference to “*changes of presence*” (132). He defines them as “changes in *structures of feeling*” (132). Williams accepts the challenge of this phrase and writes that “‘feeling’ is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’” (132). The term is difficult, but Williams appears to make the distinction that what he is concerned with analysing is presence related to present time, as opposed to a shared space. “[W]e are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt”, writes Williams, “a social experience which is still *in process*” (132). He makes the case that he is not pitting one form against another form: “not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity” (132). He concludes by summing up his hypothesis as “a mode of social formation, explicit and recognizable in specific kinds of art, which is distinguishable from other social and semantic formations by its articulation of presence” (135). Berlant’s work carries forward Williams’ critical interest in the lived social experience of thoughtful feelings, expressed through presence.

The link between Williams and Berlant has been noted by other scholars who highlight their mutual interest in the formation of the present moment. Michael Kaplan describes *Cruel Optimism* as an “exceptional” piece of work (525), suggesting Berlant “does as much as anyone since Raymond Williams to render both palpable and revelatory the theoretical, experiential and political intimacy between the affective pulsions and formal contours of the historical present” (530). Despite the present as the key temporal locus of

cruel optimism, the concept engages with both the past and the future. Crucially, Berlant describes cruel optimism as a desire to “return to” fantasy:

Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. (2)

Here, Berlant describes the idealistic action of ‘going back’, to “return to” and repeat an attachment in the hope that change will arrive. It is the gap between a past aim, or hope, and the experience of the present moment. Hope is, of course, an essentially future-orientated feeling because it focuses on an expectation of the future. However, it is not just the temporality of cruel optimism that is important to its meaning: spatiality is also key (both literal and metaphorical). The above quotation highlights that “nearness” to a thing is of central importance in relations of cruel optimism. In this way, cruel optimism is bound together with the notion of proximity and analysing the proximate relations that people form with objects. Proximity, of course, describes a relation and cruel optimism is also a relation – the “condition of maintaining an attachment” – between the aim and the object. In this next section I explain the link between cruel optimism and precarity (Berlant 24).

2.10 Cruel optimism and precarity

Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism is intricately tied to precarity, as she describes:

My book *Cruel Optimism* (2011) tracks precarity in terms of the desperation and violence that have been released when the capitalist ‘good life’ fantasy no longer has anything to which to attach its promises of flourishing, coasting, and resting [...] in Europe the dawning awareness that social democracy was falling apart became widely available in the 1990s as neoliberal pressures privatized and globalized finance and local wealth; but the credit bubble delayed its appearance in the US within a popular politics to the last five years or so. (Berlant in Puar 171)²⁰

Berlant’s use of the phrases ‘precarity’ and ‘precarious’ is slightly different from Butler’s understanding of these terms, and this is worth observing because, as Puar observed in 2011, at the time, “Judith Butler and Lauren Berlant were the most prominent US-based thinkers on

²⁰ Whilst Berlant speaks primarily to a US context, I argue that the concept of “good life” promises which she analyses have their own equivalent in Britain, and the section of this chapter on ‘nostalgia’ explores this in greater detail. I also contend that Berlant is incorrect in claiming the “dawning awareness” of the collapse of social democracy occurred in Britain in the 1990s, and suggest that this realisation was propelled by the 2007 - 8 credit collapse in Britain, and has been evolving steadily throughout the last two decades.

precarity taken up in the European context” (163). Berlant suggests cruel optimism “tracks the emergence of a precarious public sphere, an intimate public of subjects who circulate scenarios of economic and intimate contingency” (3). In response to these new precarious movements, Berlant argues that there are new genres and aesthetic forms, including, the “situation tragedy” (6): in “the situation tragedy, the subject’s world is fragile beyond repair, one gesture away from losing all access to sustaining its fantasies: the situation threatens utter, abject unravelling” (6). Berlant argues that neoliberalism has produced this new genre:

neoliberalism produces the situation tragedy as a way of expressing the costs of what’s ordinary now, the potential within any grounding space to become a nonplace for anyone whose inconvenience to the reproduction of value becomes suddenly, one again, apparent. (291n19)²¹

Berlant’s description of the potentiality of a space to become a “nonplace” for individuals who no longer provide “value” suggests neoliberalism produces an environment that is precarious for individuals.²² The potential for space to suddenly alter ties in with the attention Christian Attinger gives to the precarious as a place of transgression: “the precarious is often associated with the process of transgressing thresholds or borders, highlighting the indeterminacy of what comes of or after this transgression” (Attinger in Aragay and Middeke 37). Berlant suggests this transgressive environment is pervasive and has produced new aesthetics such as the “cinema of precarity”,

in which attention to a pervasive contemporary social precariousness marks a relation to older traditions of neorealism, while speaking as well to the new social movements that have organized under the rubrics of ‘precarity’ and the ‘precarious’. (7)

For Berlant, “the shifting up of economic precarity” is key to cruel optimism (191). By this she means that downward mobility is rising – the once-stable middle classes now experience the constant sense of contingency familiar to poorer classes. Berlant argues that there is now an increased probability “that structural contingency will create manifest crisis situations in ordinary existence for more kinds of people” (11). She notes Jean-Claude Barbier’s work on precarity and labour in Europe arguing that “the concept has become elastic, describing an affective atmosphere penetrating all classes” and this extension has led to “*précarisation*” which is “the process of society as a whole becoming more precarious and basically

²¹ The ‘n’ here refers to ‘note’ – all subsequent quotations in this format refer to the ‘Notes’ sections of the books indicated.

²² Berlant highlights that the term “non-place” comes from Marc Augé’s *Non-Places* (291n19).

destabilized” (201).²³ As noted, Isabell Lorey asserts that precarity has become the new “normal” for more people in different class systems: “[n]ow those who should be the white middle class experience precarity as if it is new. It is no longer located at the ‘margins,’ related to the nonhegemonic” (Lorey in Puar 164, 172). Lorey suggests that “when precarization becomes ‘democratized’ new forms of democracy are practiced” (Lorey in Puar 172).

The extension of an ordinary crisis to more kinds of people is a direct result of the precarious neoliberal economic and political projects I described earlier. Writing in 2011, Berlant notes that the time period her theory focuses on is “between 1990 and the present” (3), the time in which, as Harvey argues, neoliberalism has “become hegemonic as a mode of discourse” (3). Further, Berlant suggests the “fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality” and “meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair” (3). These fantasies are directly connected to the promises of neoliberalism for the individual. As Jo Littler suggests, the rise in meritocracy has advanced alongside the rise in neoliberalism: “over the past few decades, the language of meritocracy has become [...] a key ideological term in the reproduction of neoliberal culture” (2).

Berlant’s understanding of precarity centres on a precarious life environment, particularly tied to economic instability. This life environment is one that neoliberalism has produced and the figure of the freelancer is at its centre. Berlant defines the freelancer as “one of the sovereign figures of neoliberalism, the person on contract, who makes short-term deals for limited obligation and thrives through the hustle over the long haul” (76). She considers that this way of life is central to neoliberalism, and describes early neoliberalism as “romance of the temporary, the flexible, and the entrepreneurial” (154). For Berlant, the work of the freelancer is dominated by “entrepreneurial precarity” (*Cruel Optimism* 76). This is a type of precarity that clearly focuses on the state of the economy, and the cultural and political environment generated by neoliberal working conditions. Berlant clarifies that her understanding of precarity is in alignment with “the global political movement of the ‘precarious’ that has emerged” (270n2). She argues that this precarity has surfaced during the period “of the good-life fantasy’s *frayage*” and describes this new movement as “toward the

²³ Berlant references Jean-Claude Barbier’s “A Comparative Analysis of ‘Employment Precariousness’ in Europe”.

invention of new communities of care and political belonging [...] the politically mobilized response to the more general scenario of impasse and adjustment” (270n2).

The political movement that Berlant describes is distinct from the vulnerable interdependency on others that Judith Butler understands as precarity. Berlant highlights that her language of precarity contrasts with Butler’s usage of the term:

this version of ‘precarity’ resonates only obliquely with the ethical notion of ‘precariousness’ advanced by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* and elsewhere. Butler’s usage is vernacular – meaning – ‘vulnerable’ – and does not refer to the meme’s political mobilization in Europe, South America, and the United States. (270n2)

Berlant and Butler offer two different understandings of precarity: in short, Butler’s precarity refers to the vulnerable interdependency an individual shares with others and the personal ethical obligation this produces; Berlant’s precarity refers to a global political, economic movement characterised by contingency which has produced a sense of ongoing crisis.

This is not to say that the two versions of precarity do not share overlaps of thought: Berlant acknowledges that both she and Butler recognise political injustice amplifies vulnerability and both share a solidarity in engaging with the formation of political subjectivity (270n2). Further, Puar has described precarity as allowing for both versions:

My main interest in precariousness has therefore been in the relation between its materiality in class and political terms, its appearances as an affect, and as an emotionally invested slogan that circulates in and beyond specific circumstances. It’s a rallying cry for a thriving new world of interdependency and care that’s not just private, but it is also an idiom for describing a loss of faith in a fantasy world to which generations have become accustomed. (Puar 166)

The description of precarity as a “cry” for “a new world of interdependency” appears to relate to Butler’s notion of precarity as interdependency, but the addition of “care” recalls Berlant’s description of “new communities of care” (Puar 166; Berlant 270n2). The “loss of faith in a fantasy world” clearly aligns with Berlant’s cruel optimism (Puar 166).

Butler is also keen to highlight the linking threads between different versions of precarity. In *Frames of War* (2009) she argues that because the body is “exposed to socially and political articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality” this means “[t]he more or less existential conception of ‘precariousness’ is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of ‘precarity’” (3). She has further noted the importance of maintaining dialogue between these two conceptions:

I think it may be important to keep active the relationship between the various meanings

of the precarious that both Isabell and Jasbir have laid out: (1) precariousness, a function of our social vulnerability and exposure that is always given some political form, and precarity as differentially distributed, and so one important dimension of the unequal distribution of conditions required for continued life; but also (2) precaritization as an ongoing process, so that we do not reduce the power of the precarious to single acts or single events. (Butler in Puar 169)

Here, Butler calls for fluid understandings of “precarious” to include precariousness as social vulnerability, precarity distinguished by unequal living conditions, and precaritization as an evolving process that has a wider significance than a singular event. She requests that “the relationship” between these be “kept active”, highlighting that interpretations of the precarious are interlinked. Further, Butler notes that the above descriptions do not even touch on Berlant’s understanding and that to elide any one of the definitions produces problems:

If we only stayed with ‘precaritization,’ I am not sure that we could account for the structure of feeling that Lauren has brought up. And if we decided to rally under the name of ‘the precarious’ we might be making a social and political condition into an identity, and so cloaking some way that that form of power actually works. (Butler in Puar 169)

The key issue here is that Butler and Berlant’s versions of precarity are both linked to dependency. Of course, cruel optimism also centres upon dependency: subjects are dependent on the attachments they hold to fantasies. Butler’s precarity focuses upon interdependency with others – “[p]recarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency” (Butler in Puar 170) – while Berlant highlights how dependency is key to neoliberal precarity:

At root, precarity is a condition of dependency – as a legal term, *precarious* describes the situation wherein your tenancy on your land is in someone else’s hands. Yet capitalist activity always induces destabilizing scenes of productive destruction – of resources and of lives being made and unmade according to the dictates and whims of the market. But, as David Harvey and many others argue, neoliberal economic practices mobilize this instability in unprecedented ways. The profit interests of the owners of neoliberal capital are served by the shrinkage of the social welfare state, the privatization of what had once been publicly held utilities and institutions, the increase in state, banking, and corporate pension insecurity, and the ever more ‘flexible’ practices of contractual reciprocity between owners and workers, which ostensibly keeps business nimble and more capable of responding to market demand. (192)

Berlant considers cruel optimism to be an affective symptom of this neoliberal precarity. In the following chapters, cruel optimism will be a key framework for discussion of my case studies and I will be using both Berlant and Butler’s definitions of precarity throughout.

Though distinct, they are linked, as I have shown (and linked to other theorisations of precarity); and they have both evolved as a way of characterising the time period under consideration. The theatrical case studies I analyse engage with both versions of what it means to be precarious (Butler's existential precarity focused on vulnerable interdependency between individuals and Berlant's entrepreneurial precarity generated by neoliberal working and economic conditions). I am concerned with the way in which theatre stages the *affective symptoms* of precarity. Each of my case studies not only explores precarity, but also the affective attachment to fantasies of a better life experienced during acute moments of precarity.

2.11 Cruel optimism and utopia

Despite cruel optimism's concern with the present moment, because it focuses on the relation of attachment to "something you desire" (Berlant 1), I wish to emphasise its connection to theories of utopia, which centre on similar ideas of attachment to a sustaining fantasy. This work is important to undertake as my theatrical case studies present ideas of utopia.

A 'utopia' is an imagined place, society, or community that is thought to possess considerably better qualities than the contemporary society. The word 'utopia' derives from the Greek *οὐ* ('not') and *τόπος* ('place'), which combined means 'no-place'. There are many interpretations of utopia but it is usually understood as an imagined world better in comparison to one's own. In a similar way, cruel optimism suggests the desire for something to improve, as Berlant articulates:

All attachments are optimistic. When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could seem embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, a good idea – whatever. (Berlant 23)

Despite Berlant's claim that cruel optimism is the ongoing traumatic condition of the present, I argue that a present cannot easily be separated from the future for which it strives, as the above quotation indicates. A "cluster of promises" that "we want" indicates a future expectation based on something "we" desire.

Utopia is important not only in relation to the "promises" made in political and social instances of cruel optimism, but also in relation to what is presented on the theatrical stage.

Jill Dolan has offered some of the most substantial thoughts on contemporary theatre's connection to utopianism. She argues that

live performance provides a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting imitations of a better world. (2)

She suggests that these types of performance can lead to “expressions of hope and love” not only for individuals close to us, but “for a more abstracted notion of ‘community’, or for an even more intangible idea of ‘humankind’” (2). Dolan coins the term “utopian performatives” (5) to describe the theatrical moments she is interested in:

[they are] small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (5)

The key to these performatives, according to Dolan, is that – as opposed to just presenting an alternative world – they actively ‘do’ something to affect the world: “performance itself becomes a ‘doing’ in linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin’s sense of the term, something that in its enunciation *acts* – that is, performs an action as tangible and effective” (5). In this way, Dolan suggests that utopian performatives are moments of affect: “[u]topian performatives, in their doings, make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better” (6). She explains that her concern “is with how utopia can be imagined or experienced affectively, through feelings, in small, incremental moments that performance can provide” (39). This understanding of utopia is not simply a model of another world. Dolan draws on the film theorist Richard Dyer who suggests that entertainment is utopic, but, rather than providing examples of alternative worlds, “utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents...what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised” (Dyer in Dolan 39). It is the “feeling” provoked by these performative moments that turn them from a passive dream into something that can offer politically active potential. Dolan describes how these moments provide the potential to try out ideas of new models of community and engagement: “[t]he affective and ideological ‘doings’ we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives also critically rehearse civic engagement that could be affective in the wider public and political realm” (7).

As Berlant's cruel optimism concerns affect and the desire for a better experience it seems pertinent to connect it to Dolan's idea of a utopia of affect. Indeed, Dolan writes of the persuasive promise that her utopian performatives offer, suggesting that they:

persuade us that beyond this 'now' of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we're seared by the promise of a present that gestures towards a better later. (7)

However, cruel optimism is distinct from notions of utopia because its binding focus is the painful failure of utopic fantasies. Utopia is different because it relies on *enjoyment* of the imagined object, or condition, that is missing. Cruel optimism is utopia disintegrating in the present moment, whereas Dolan's utopia is a state of *always-becoming*. Cruel optimism dictates that utopia will never materialise, and Berlant's theory instead focuses on the present feelings of attachment between the subject and the object in which they place their utopic hope for a better existence. However, Dolan explains her utopian performatives allow for "a utopia always in process, always only partially grasped, as it disappears before us around the corners of narrative and social experience" (6). In this way, cruel optimism is counter to utopian performatives, although both scholars focus on affect. Interestingly, and considering my earlier remarks on the indexical trace, Dolan considers the processual nature of her ideas concerning utopia to be a form of index:

Thinking of utopia as processual, as an index to the possible, to the 'what if,' rather than a more restrictive, finite image of the 'what should be,' allows performance a hopeful cast, one that can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that's always, itself, in process. (13)

Dolan highlights the indexicality of utopia: it is a referent to something else, "to the possible" (13). If utopia is an index, it can always remain hopeful because it is generative and looks outward, beyond the present condition. Certainly, both cruel optimism and utopia rest on a desire of how life *should* be: a desire for something else, even a nostalgia for another time, place, or condition that perhaps did not exist, or will never exist. Whilst cruel optimism is concerned with the present, I contend that the future-orientated idea of utopia and past-orientated idea of nostalgia are both central to shaping the affective present. Nostalgia for a place or time of elsewhere is crucial to how cruel optimism is understood. Since each of my case studies engage with notions of nostalgia, I now turn to the link between cruel optimism and nostalgia to lay the foundations for this work.

2.12 Cruel optimism and nostalgia

Nostalgia is a complex idea related to the affective feelings bound up with cruel optimism. It is generally understood as a past-orientated idea, characterised as a sentimental longing for a former place or time. In *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (2005), John J. Su explains that nostalgia is always a reaction to the present. He writes that nostalgia

encourages an imaginative exploration of how present systems of social relations fail to address human needs, and the specific objects of nostalgia – lost or imagined homelands – represent efforts to articulate alternatives. (5)

Like the founding principles of utopia, Su suggests that nostalgia relates primarily to a ‘place’ – a ‘homeland’. Exactly what and where people are nostalgic for has of course shifted throughout time and part of the work of this thesis is to ascertain what kind of nostalgic discourses operates in contemporary theatre.

Nostalgia is implicit in the theory underpinning cruel optimism. In her opening chapter, Berlant analyses an untitled poem by the American poet John Ashbery which describes “the scene of the American dream not realized” and suggests it as an example of cruel optimism (29). Cruel optimism is a reaction to the impossibility of the American Dream: “[a]t the center of the project” is “the good life” (Berlant 2).²⁴ The American Dream is a seductive concept and its rhetoric is always prevalent in US politics: Donald Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’ presidential campaign claimed the American Dream had been lost and that Trump would restore it. In his Presidential Announcement speech he boasted “[s]adly, the American dream is dead. But if I get elected president I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before, and we will make America great again”. Whilst cruel optimism focuses on the desire *for* certain future projects like the arrival of the American Dream, Trump’s language describes an American Dream that has *already* been lost. Trump claims citizens are not waiting for the “good life fantasy” as described by Berlant, they are already nostalgically mourning its loss (1).

The nostalgic slogans and political campaigns prevalent in American politics have been clearly mirrored in recent political activity in Britain. The ‘Make America Great

²⁴ The idea of the American Dream was first coined by the American writer James Truslow Adams in *Epic of America* (1931), though based on the principles of the Founding Fathers: “the American dream [...] has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations...” (405). The ideals described by Adams focus on the desire that the conditions of life should improve equally for everyone.

Again' slogan is similar to the Brexit Leave campaign's demand to 'Take Back Control'. Whilst campaigning for Britain to leave the European Union (EU), Nigel Farage MEP argued that Britain needed to 'take back control' and this quickly became the driving force of the Leave campaign: the rhetoric that a vote for Brexit would recover something that has been lost. Following the referendum on 23 June 2016, Farage claimed to the European Parliament that "the ordinary people [...] said actually, we want our country back, we want our fishing waters back, we want our borders back" ('Nigel Farage delivers').

The regressive language and harking back to a 'lost country' in these campaigns nostalgically focuses on the past. Both Trump and Farage used the concept of nostalgia to suggest that 'going back' was not a regressive move, but forward-thinking. Trump argued "[w]e need a leader that can bring back our jobs", whilst Farage suggested that "[l]eaving would mean that we would be taking back control" (Trump, 'Presidential bid'; Farage, 'Why You Should Vote').

Adapting the work of Lauren Berlant to situate cruel optimism in a British context, the scholar Robert Eaglestone uses the phrase "cruel nostalgia" to describe this political phenomenon. In his edited book *Brexit and Literature* (2018), Eaglestone applies the theory of cruel nostalgia to the forces driving Brexit. He describes the link between Brexit and cruel optimism in terms of the attachment to promises offered:

Brexit is – nearly – a very good example of 'cruel optimism'. The 'cues' given by the Leave campaigns, and by the Brexiteers in Teresa May's government suggest broad sunlit uplands after the UK leaves the EU (£350 Million for the NHS; world trade; 'taking back control'): the reality already looks materially grim. (95)

Eaglestone argues that the Brexit 'Leave' campaign continually invoked the collective memory of the Second World War through use of "images which refer to the war" and "Churchillian language" in order to powerfully convince voters of the necessity for Brexit.²⁵ Eaglestone notes that, rather than concentrate on an imagined future, in England the cruel optimism of Brexit was obsessed with a lost past:

²⁵ The continual invocation of the Second World War itself could also be seen as an instance of cruel optimism. The idea of the 'Blitz Spirit' and Britain's 'stiff upper lip' in the face of adversity is mythical. Angus Calder's *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991) explains how the myth of the Blitz Spirit (Britain's invincibility) was created (Eaglestone 101). The antecedents of this myth still exist today. Following terror attacks on Britain, the narrative of British resilient spirit is invoked. For example, after London Bridge terror attack on 4 June 2017, an image of a man fleeing from a pub – yet still carrying his pint – circulated on social media as an example of Londoners' courage in the face of terror. The desire to hold on to this image of British people as resilient can be seen as cruelly optimistic (or, as Eaglestone notes, 'cruel nostalgia'): it is an enduring and affirming fantasy, but one that is exactly that – fantasy.

Most affect theory deals with the present or (as in the case of cruel optimism), a focus on the future which ignores the detrimental effects in the present: but Brexit focusses on the past. Not cruel optimism but *cruel nostalgia*. (95-96)

The “cruel nostalgia” that Trump and Farage propagate infers that a recuperation of the past will provide an antidote to different forms of precarity: borders will be secured, more money will flood public services and countries will become “bigger and better and stronger” (Trump). In *The Ministry of Nostalgia* (2017), Owen Hatherley usefully outlines how neoliberal precarity has led to new affects of nostalgia in Britain. He analyses the period following the 2008 financial crisis, suggesting the rhetorical and cultural response to this crisis has been a nostalgic reimagining of the period of austerity in the 1940s and 50s:

‘Austerity Britain’, the period roughly from the 1940s until around 1955, when rationing was finally lifted by a Conservative government, is the direct opposite of ‘Austerity Britain’ Mark Two, the period from 2009/10 until the present when a financial crisis caused by property speculation and ‘derivatives’ culminated in massive state bailouts of the largest banks, followed by an assault on what remained of the public sphere after thirty years of neoliberalism. But this most recent austerity has nonetheless been overlaid with the imagery of that earlier era. At times this has been so pervasive that it felt as if parts of the country began to resemble a strange, dreamlike reconstruction of the 1940s and 1950s, reassembled in the wrong order. (3-4)

Hatherley provides evidence of this ‘re-turn’ to nostalgia, including the proliferation of sales of “wartime memorabilia”, the spread of the “ubiquitous” *Keep Calm and Carry On* poster (4) and the “televisual world of *Call The Midwife*” that admires the “strong, struggling, but basically deferent working class” (8). He labels this “design phenomenon” and cultural turn as “Austerity Nostalgia”, which he describes as “the form of nostalgia for the kind of public modernism that, rightly or wrongly, was seen to have characterised the period from the 1930s to the early 1970s” (18). He suggests it exemplifies a “conservative longing for security and stability in the face of hard times” (18) and draws on Raymond Williams to characterise the dominant affect of this period:

the dominance of a certain ‘structure of feeling’ (to use Raymond Williams’s phrase), where austerity’s look, its historical syncretism, its rejection of the real human advances of the post-war era had seeped into the consciousness of people who would, when pressed, probably be in opposition to it, even as they performed its aesthetics. (5)

I described earlier how Raymond Williams’s work is a precursor to the affect theory that underlines Berlant’s thinking. Hatherley argues that the complex affect generated from the precarity of the credit crunch and subsequent austerity has produced an identification with “a remarkably distorted idea of the past”; a nostalgia for the past that is “not based on lived

experience” (18). This desire for nostalgia shares similarities with Berlant’s cruel optimism in that, according to Hatherley, some members of contemporary society “console” themselves with nostalgic imagery in order to feel better about their present situation:

So we find ourselves in an increasingly nightmarish situation where an entirely twenty-first century society – constantly wired up to smartphones and the internet, living via complicated systems of derivatives, credit and unstable property investments, inherently and deeply insecure – appears to console itself with the iconography of a completely different and highly unlike era, to which it is linked solely through liberal use of the ‘A’ word. (12)

For Hatherley, the *Keep Calm and Carry On* poster especially symbolises the desire for consolation after post-crunch precarity. He claims the poster responds “to a particularly English malaise, one connected directly with the way Britain reacted to the credit crunch and the banking crash” and that the image taps into existing invocations of the Blitz and narratives of Victory that have “only intensified since the financial crash began” (16). Hatherley makes the case that the precarity generated by the credit crunch and austerity has caused a condition of nostalgia. He describes it as “a nostalgia for the state of being repressed – solid, stoic, public-spirited, as opposed to the depoliticised, hysterical and privatised reality of Britain over the last thirty years” (21). This nostalgia for repression articulates a curious propensity to erase the trauma of the Second World War in favour of the commodification of ‘Blitz Spirit’. In all this, precarity is the central feature and the response to precarity appears to be to use the fear it generates as an empty vessel in which other feelings, identities and affects, such as nostalgia, can be projected.

2.13 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set out the socio-political and theoretical contexts for my thesis. I have shown that the events of 9/11 and the 2007 – 8 financial crash have been particularly generative in terms of the responding cultural work and that this work suggests that these events have increased feelings of precarity. This chapter explored various types of precarity – personal, societal, and economic – and compared the different versions of precarity theorised by Judith Butler and Lauren Berlant. Precarity, in all its forms, has increased with the ascent of neoliberalism and I argued that one undercurrent of contemporary precarity is the notion of cruel optimism, developed by Berlant. I introduced the key components of this theory, which suggest that people are attached to optimistic

fantasies despite evidence that these fantasies are not fulfilling. I also linked cruel optimism to utopia, and nostalgia, suggesting that, despite cruel optimism's focus on the ongoing crisis of the present, it is also tied up with future-orientated and past-orientated affects.

In the introduction to their edited book, Aragay and Middeke note how contemporary theatre is often engaged with interrogating precarity: "contemporary (British) drama and theatre often realizes its thematic and formal/structural potential to the full precisely by integrating, reflecting upon and finding representations for the category and episteme of precariousness" (15). They note the propensity for plays to "confront their audiences by laying bare and emphasising the contingencies visible in performance practice" which therefore extends "vulnerability [...] across the limits of the stage to the lives of audience members" (11). This thematic concern certainly runs through my case studies, as I shall describe. I argue the theatre of the real productions that I analyse in the following chapters are thematically and structurally engaged with illuminating this precarious time through their use of indexical traces of the real: Crouch explores different kinds of realities; Blythe analyses the behaviour of communities during times of crisis, and Noble illuminates loneliness and communitarian thought.

In the following chapters I will analyse these contemporary performance case studies and explore how the indexical traces of the real are used in performance, highlighting links between the three case studies in my conclusion. I will now turn to my first case study, the practitioner Tim Crouch, and his play *An Oak Tree*, which was first performed in 2005.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCEPTUALISING THE REAL: TIM CROUCH'S *AN OAK TREE*

“When the tree is already being mentioned, you don’t also have to show it.”

– Heiner Goebbels (xxiii)

3.1 Introduction

The first two chapters of this thesis set out the theoretical, historical and political contexts for my argument. This chapter focuses on the conceptual theatre of Tim Crouch, using his play *An Oak Tree* as a case study, with some reference to his wider work. Crouch’s plays may not appear a natural bedfellow with other theatre of the real productions because his plays are not directly connected to, or inspired by, real events or people. Despite this, I will argue that Crouch’s work should be included under Carol Martin’s definition of theatre of the real because his plays “claim a *relationship* to reality” through an attempt to explore and re-conceptualise reality (*Theatre of the Real* 5, my emphasis). Although Crouch’s plays do not “recycle” reality in ways traditional to documentary theatre, this chapter will show that the form and content of his work foreground the instability of the real. For this reason, the theatre of the real taxonomy should be extended to include Crouch’s plays.

I demonstrate that his plays exemplify the extradiegetic real in contemporary English theatre, as outlined in Chapter One. I contend that the function of the extradiegetic real in Crouch’s plays is to destabilise the authority of stage realism, in favour of what might be described as a more conceptual form of theatre: that is to say, Crouch’s plays discursively perform the real, rather than presenting it.

This chapter is organised in four main parts. It opens by tracing the development of Crouch’s theatrical career in order to understand the context for a discussion of *An Oak Tree*. Secondly, I introduce *An Oak Tree* and analyse it in relation to an artwork by Michael Craig-Martin’s, also titled *An Oak Tree* (1973), which inspired Crouch’s play. By analysing Craig-Martin, I consider the relationship between Crouch’s theatre and dematerialised conceptual art practices. Here, I also draw on the relationship between Crouch’s theatre and Christian ritual, via a discussion of the theological concept of transubstantiation. In the third section, I

introduce the indexical traces of the real – archive, presence, and technology – which are the dramaturgical processes through which Crouch explores the function of the real in performance. My focus is on how presence operates in Crouch’s work, as it is important to *An Oak Tree* in both content and form: the storyline of a Father conceptually ‘transforming’ an oak tree into his dead daughter is supported on stage by use of a second actor (in addition to Crouch) who has never read the script ‘transforming’ into the role of the Father. For Crouch, presence operates as the central indexical trace of the real, and I explain how the archive and technology support this.

Finally, I show that Crouch uses the indexical trace of the real in the presence of the second actor in order to explore the impact of precarity. The precarious situation of the second actor provides the audience with an embodied understanding of the precarity the characters experience, following the death of Claire. Just as the characters are forced to perceive the reality of their world in a new way, so too are the audience encouraged to perceive an unrehearsed actor holding a script, as the character of the Father in the play. The destabilisation of reality through precarity links the content of *An Oak Tree* together with the form. As I explained in the Introduction, *An Oak Tree* is predominately concerned with existential precarity, rather than the societal precarity that Blythe and Noble explore. This reflects the time in which it was made – part of the “crisis” period at the start of the twenty-first century that Angelaki describes (*Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain* 1), but not yet entrenched in the age of austerity that characterised the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The analysis in this chapter requires in-depth performance analysis and close reading of *An Oak Tree*. There are currently two text editions of *An Oak Tree* as Crouch slightly edited the script for the 2015 version at the National Theatre.²⁶ An updated text was published to accompany the 2015 anniversary production. *An Oak Tree* has widely toured, both nationally and internationally. In October 2016, a French-language version of *An Oak Tree* was performed in Paris. In May 2018, *An Oak Tree* was performed at the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond. I have seen the play on three separate occasions: twice at the National Theatre (2015), and the French translation of the play in Paris (2016).

I start this chapter by providing an overview of the work of Crouch and his creative collaborators, in order to set *An Oak Tree* in context alongside his wider body of work.

²⁶ For the purposes of this thesis, this chapter uses the updated script of *An Oak Tree*, published in 2015. Compared to the original, there were minimal changes to this script, and I highlight these changes where important.

Following these remarks, I examine the most relevant and recent scholarship on Crouch to highlight the range of critical approaches to his work and navigate my place within the field.

3.2 Tim Crouch: career and critical reception

Tim Crouch works closely with Karl James and Andy Smith, who regularly co-direct his plays.²⁷ Other notable collaborators include the late theatre-maker Adrian Howells, Chris Goode, Sue MacLaine and Hannah Ringham. Crouch often reinforces the valuable contribution his collaborators make to his work: “I’m on a mission to make people aware that I’m not a solo artist. I’m sometimes challenged by the branding of Tim Crouch” (*The Scotsman* interview). With this in mind, when I analyse Crouch’s work throughout this chapter, it is important to note I am not ignoring the contribution of his collaborators: the presence of James and Smith as his co-artists is always implied.

Crouch began his work in theatre as an actor. After studying drama at the University of Bristol, Crouch co-founded ‘Public Parts’, a devising company, which toured political work to arts’ venues. Cristina Delgado-Garcia suggests the lack of critical recognition on this period means “part of [Crouch’s] own political and theatrical history has been understated” and calls for a reappraisal of his current work with this politically active history in mind (75). In 1993, Crouch “took a postgraduate acting course” at the Central School of Speech and Drama (Love 4). Following this, he taught with the National Theatre’s Education Department and this led to a writing career: “[i]t was through exploring ideas in my teaching that I found the confidence and authority in myself to start writing” (Crouch in Ilter 398). Crouch describes how his background as an actor influenced his experimental writing style: “it comes from those frustrations that I felt at the beginning about what is an actor, so I am writing pieces that require a different approach to performance” (Crouch in Ilter 103). The following chapter details how Blythe also began her theatrical work as an actor, but then experienced dissatisfaction. However, whilst Blythe’s dissatisfaction with theatre related to a lack of casting opportunities, Crouch’s related to what he viewed as the limitations of stage realism and some styles of actor training.

²⁷ Andy Smith is a theatre-maker and academic. Tim Crouch’s website writes “a smith is the working name of Andy Smith”, although I believe this is slightly out of date, and he now makes theatre under the name of Andy Smith and so, for continuity, this name is used in this thesis. Karl James is a director and dialogue artist; he runs ‘The Dialogue Project’ (www.thedialogueproject.com), a collective that improves creative dialogue between groups of people. His book *Say It and Solve It* (2014) discusses the principles of dialogue. Currently, the only theatre work he engages with is directing Crouch’s plays.

In 2003, Crouch's first play for adults, *My Arm*, was produced. Since then, Crouch has written five more plays for adults: *An Oak Tree* (2005), *ENGLAND* (2007), *The Author* (2009), *what happens to the hope at the end of the evening* (co-written with Andy Smith, 2013) and *Adler & Gibb* (2014). He has also written several plays for children and young people, including *Shopping for Shoes* (2003), *Kaspar The Wild* (2006), and a series of one-man shows that tell the story of a Shakespeare play through a secondary character who watches events from the side-lines: *I, Caliban* (2003), *I, Banquo* (2005), *I, Peaseblossom* (2006), *I, Malvolio* (2010) and *I, Cinna (The Poet)* (2012). Crouch's most recent play is *Beginners*, a play for adults and children, which premiered at the Unicorn Theatre, London, in March 2018. He has been the central performer in most of his plays, with the exception of *I, Cinna (The Poet)*, *Beginners*, and *Adler & Gibb* (although, in this, Crouch performed as Sam on tour in Los Angeles).²⁸

Crouch's productions have received national and international acclaim. Awards include a Total Theatre Award, a Fringe First and Herald Angel for *ENGLAND*, a Total Theatre Award for Innovation and the 2010 John Whiting Award for *The Author*, and an Obie and Herald Angel for *An Oak Tree*. Scholarly reaction to Crouch's work often comments on the intellectual rigour and risk-taking formal innovations of his plays. For example, Dan Rebellato labels him "one of the most daring, playful and challenging theatremakers to emerge in the 2000s" (125). A collection of essays on Crouch's work has been published in French, titled *Tim Crouch ou la scène émancipée*. The collection is edited by Élisabeth Angel-Perez, Christine Kiehl and Jean-Marc Lanteri and includes two chapters in the English language (one by Dan Rebellato, and the other by Estelle Rivier-Arnaud), and an interview with Crouch. In 2017, Catherine Love wrote a short book on *An Oak Tree* published by Routledge for their series *The Fourth Wall*. There is yet to be a substantial monograph on Crouch's work in English, although there are several insightful articles and book chapters: in 2011, an issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* was dedicated to Crouch's work, whilst Rebellato's chapter 'Tim Crouch', in *Modern British Playwriting 2000 – 2009: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*, offers a robust overview of several plays. Helen Freshwater's chapter 'Children and the Limits of Representation in the Work of Tim Crouch', in Angelaki's *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground*, provides an illuminating analysis of the use of children in Crouch's plays, and Delgado-Garcia's *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity* (2015) uses his play

²⁸ A further list and comprehensive introduction to Crouch's work can be found in Seda Ilter's introduction to her interview with Crouch: "A Process of Transformation": Tim Crouch on *My Arm*'.

ENGLAND as one of her case studies to explore new ways of thinking about character. Crouch and his collaborators welcome the interest of scholars in their work, encouraging cross-discipline conversation where possible, and he often performs his plays at academic conferences.²⁹

3.3 *An Oak Tree*: Michael Craig-Martin and Tim Crouch

On 8 June 2015, the Royal Academy's annual *Summer Exhibition* opened (8 June – 16 August 2015). The exhibition was “co-ordinated” by Michael Craig-Martin RA, “a leading artist of his generation” (Royal Academy website). That same summer, on the opposite side of the Thames, Crouch performed a ten-year anniversary run of his 2005 play *An Oak Tree* in the Temporary Theatre at the National Theatre. The simultaneity of both these cultural events is serendipitous: in 1973, Craig-Martin created an artwork called *An Oak Tree*, first exhibited at the Rowan Gallery in London (Nusser in Hentschel, 58; Cork in ‘Inhale/Exhale’, 8; Walker, *Landscapes*). In the front pages of the published text of his debut play *My Arm* (2003), Crouch promised his next play would be titled *An Oak Tree* because he felt Craig-Martin's artwork “was very, very directly speaking to the work in *My Arm*” (Crouch, *Platform*).³⁰

The initial production of *An Oak Tree* took place at the Traverse Theatre in 2005 as part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and it subsequently toured to places including Brighton, and New York. It was well received critically: awards for the play include a Herald Angel at the 2005 Edinburgh Festival, the Best Male Actor Award at the Brighton Festival for Crouch (2006), and a Special Citation Obie award in New York (2007). Rebellato notes that, in 2010, “Foyles bookshop organized a ‘Play of the Decade’ promotion” and Caryl Churchill chose *An Oak Tree* as her play of the 2000s (Rebellato *Modern British Playwriting*, 295n4), writing

²⁹ Crouch's play *The Author* was performed at the University of Leeds in 2010 at a symposium dedicated to his work titled ‘The Author and the Audience’. This symposium was an attempt at “a two-way conversation between academic critics and theatre practitioners”, as Crouch encourages (Bottoms, *Introduction* 391). In 2014, Crouch and Smith performed *what happens to the hope at the end of the evening* at the *What Happens Now: 21st Century Writing in English* conference at the University of Lincoln. In September 2015, Crouch was the keynote speaker at the *Are We On The Same Page? Approaches to Text and Performance* conference at Royal Holloway. In 2016, Crouch was a keynote speaker at the *British Theatre in the 21st Century* conference at the University of Sorbonne, Paris, and, in 2017, Crouch gave a short talk – “The Art of the Autosuggestion” – as part of a TedX event at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Crouch's academic influence stretches beyond theatre scholarship: on 30 April 2018 Crouch spoke on a panel at an LSE Forum event on Shakespeare, demonstrating the literary and philosophical interest in Crouch's plays. Crouch's creative partners also engage in academic study: Andy Smith completed a practice-based PhD at the University of Lancaster in 2015, exploring both the theatre he makes with Crouch, and his practice as a solo artist. He now lectures at the University of Manchester.

³⁰ In the page of the original script of *My Arm* that follows the cast biographies, it is written: “news from nowhere's next project is *An Oak Tree*, 1973”.

that it is “a play about theatre, a magic trick, a laugh and a vivid experience of grief, and it spoils you for a while for other plays” (Churchill in Rebellato, ‘Tim Crouch’ 126).

An Oak Tree is a play for two actors. Crouch performs the part of the ‘Hypnotist’ and the second actor plays the role of ‘Father’ (listed as ‘Father’ in the play text, though in the content of the dialogue the character’s name is Andy). Each time the play is performed, a new guest actor takes the role of the Father for that night only. To date, over 250 actors have played the role of the Father, including Mike Myers, Toby Jones and Sophie Okonedo. The play requires the second actor to be placed in the precarious position of not having seen or read the play beforehand. The second actor will meet with Crouch an hour before the performance starts, to ask any questions, “test levels on a microphone and practise with a separate bit of script to get a sense of sightreading in the space” (17). A basic page of notes is also provided “to anyone who may be considering taking part in a performance” (17). These notes are printed alongside the play. In the play, Crouch guides some of the second actor’s speech and actions using different modes of instruction. The actor wears an earpiece and Crouch uses a microphone to feed instructions to them. At other times, the actor reads from a script, or Crouch tells the actor certain lines to repeat.

The play’s narrative follows the Father, whose daughter, Claire, has been hit and killed by a car. It transpires that the Hypnotist is the driver of the car that killed Claire. In the play, the Father attends one of the Hypnotist’s shows in order to tell him that he has “done something” that is “impossible” and to ask for the Hypnotist’s “help” (50). Alongside scenes between the two men, there are also scenes between Andy and his wife Dawn (Dawn is also played by Crouch): “[d]on’t you go mad on me, man. I need you” (61). Other scenes that comprise the play feature scripted dialogue between Crouch and the second actor, as though they are ‘themselves’, discussing the narrative and mechanics of the play: “[w]ho’s your favourite character?” (54).

In order to lay the foundations for understanding the unusual form of this play, it is first necessary to explore what is meant by ‘dematerialised theatre’, a term Crouch uses to describe his work.

3.4 Dematerialised theatre³¹

³¹ In this section, and chapter, I spell dematerialised with an ‘s’, as this is the way that Crouch and Smith spell the term. However, where I am referring to quotations from John Chandler and Lucy Lippard who first used the term in relation to contemporary American art, I use the American spelling of ‘dematerialized’ with a ‘z’. I have included both spellings to correctly quote both.

Crouch and his collaborators have referred to their work as “pure theatre”, “more theatre”, or “very theatre” (Rebellato, ‘Tim Crouch’ 132). Rebellato considers that these terms are a light-hearted response to the value placed on realist theatre:

There is no particular reason to assume that the relationship between the stage and the fictional world should be one of resemblance; in fact, most stage sets do not significantly resemble the worlds they represent. But even when they do, there is no more reason to think that the theatre is at its purest when it resembles the world than there is to think that language is at its purest when it is onomatopoeic. All theatre involves a kind of imaginative transformation of the visual material before us into something else. (Rebellato, ‘Tim Crouch’ 132)

The use of the emphatic adverbs “more”, “pure” and “very” appear to ironically challenge the idea that theatre is at its most theatrical when it offers a naturalistic semblance of reality. The terms are also strangely contradictory: “more” suggests an additional increase of something, whereas “pure” signals something clear, something streamlined and unmixed. These terms are now referred to less by Crouch and his collaborators and the preference is to refer to their theatre practice as ‘dematerialised theatre’:

I describe my work as “dematerialised” theatre. This is a loose and imperfect term but, for me, it suggests a theatre that is closer to being a conceptual artwork than a figurative or representational form. (Crouch *Aesthetica Magazine*)

The term ‘dematerialised’ is historical, taken from the conceptual art world of the 1960s and 70s, and Smith indicates this legacy when he states that dematerialised theatre

is a theatre that – inspired by the conceptual art practices of the late sixties and early seventies from which it takes its name – looks to try and do more with less. It’s a theatre resistant to the construction of places and things... This is a theatre that may appear small, but it wants to think big. (‘What Can We Do?’)

Crouch et al. attribute the first use of ‘dematerialized’ to the American writer, curator and contemporary art critic, Lucy R. Lippard. Lippard’s 1973 book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* offers an overview of the period from 1966 to 1972 when, she argues, new practices of contemporary art focused on “dematerialization” (Lippard *Six Years...* 5). Her first use of the term was in an essay co-written with the art critic John Chandler, titled ‘the dematerialization of art’, published in *Art International* in 1968. The essay tracks the development of “an ultra conceptual art” (46) and identifies some of its defining features. In particular, they describe dematerialized art as “anti-formal” because it

“*continues from* the opposing formalist premise that painting and sculptures should be looked at as objects *per se* rather than as references to other images or representation” (49).

In art, formalism dictates that art objects should be regarded as objects in themselves, not as referents to other ideas and objects. In formalism, everything that can be understood about the work is contained within the art object itself and the context, politics, or concept informing the work is considered not necessary to its appreciation. In contrast, dematerialised art grew from the nominalist and minimalist artistic movements and followed a ‘Less is More’ dictum, which involved “opening up rather than narrowing down” (Lippard and Chandler 47). Central to this art practice was that a greater demand was placed on the viewer to participate more fully in the experience: “they demand more participation by the viewer” and “[m]ore time must be spent in experience of a detail-less work” (Lippard and Chandler 46). Interestingly, Lippard and Chandler note the performative nature of this art practice, stating that it brings “performance attitudes into painting and sculpture” (48).

Lippard and Chandler argue the new trend “appears to be provoking a dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object’s [sic] becoming wholly obsolete” (46). They claim “the dematerialization of the object might eventually lead to the disintegration of criticism today” (49). Whilst the claim that dematerialising the object “may lead to the disintegration of criticism” is hyperbolic, their focus on the status of the object is key. It suggests this new artistic movement was not overly concerned with placing value on an object as the artistic ‘end product’, but instead intended to create the possibility of art as experience and ideas, rather than solely material objects. Lippard and Chandler suggest, “[d]ematerialized art is post-aesthetic only in its increasingly non-visual emphases” (48). The non-visual emphasis of dematerialised art attempts to demand an increase in viewer reflection on and engagement with the work. The uses of the terms ‘dematerialized’ and ‘dematerialization’ in the essay align with their use by Crouch in relation to his theatre practice, as I will examine: that is, a focus on the reduction of the material aspects of the work and an increase in the importance of viewer participation.

Lippard’s critical influence is still important to twenty-first century art, culture and criticism. An exhibition called ‘Materializing “Six Years”: Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art’ took place at the Brooklyn Museum from September 2012 – February 2013, and a book of the same name was published to accompany the exhibition. In the preface to this book, Lippard states that the art discussed in her original book:

was dedicated to the subversion of art-world assumptions, a need to challenge authority, to question everything, especially the nature of art itself and the context within which it was made, shown, and distributed. (in Bonin and Morris xii)

These political origins of conceptual art are important to highlight because, as Delgado-Garcia argues, “conceptual art’s ambiguous relationship with capitalism has been understated in the debate on Crouch’s work” (69).

In the contemporary art world, the phrase ‘dematerialised’ remains primarily associated with Lippard and Chandler’s text. To my knowledge, Crouch and his collaborators are the first people to use the phrase as a way to describe a theatre practice.

3.5 Conceptual theatre

In this thesis, I use ‘conceptual theatre’ to describe Crouch’s work. First, I want to highlight Crouch’s debt to conceptual art practices. Second, in referring to his theatre as ‘dematerialised’ theatre, there is a danger in only considering his work under these specific terms. It is also worth considering how possible a ‘dematerialised theatre’ actually is, given that we inextricably live in a material world. I contend that Crouch’s work not only dematerialises objects, but it also *materialises* and *re-materialises* them. Therefore, his work stands at the intersection between a dematerialised, materialised, and re-materialised theatre.

Several scholars, and Crouch himself, have noted that conceptual art has inspired and shaped his theatre-making, as Love identifies: “[i]t’s an influence that he himself often talks about in interviews, and it has been commented on by scholars such as Emilie Morin (2011) and Stephen Bottoms (2009)” (10). The visual and conceptual arts feature as a strong theme in the content of Crouch’s work. In *My Arm*, a boy decides to live with his arm held above his head and this action is heralded by the contemporary art world as one of great significance: “[t]here are maquettes of my arm in Madrid” (44). The play *ENGLAND* features a character whose boyfriend “buys and sells art for other people” and it is described by Crouch as a play written to be performed in art galleries, rather than theatres (15). *Adler & Gibb* follows several strands of narrative relating to the life of two conceptual artists “united in their desire to integrate art and everyday life” (29). The form of each of these plays is also directly inspired by conceptual art practices, as this chapter will explore in relation to *An Oak Tree*. Although *An Oak Tree* does not overtly feature discussion of art in the narrative of the play, the ideas in the play are influenced by Michael Craig-Martin’s 1973 artwork of the same title.

Emilie Morin usefully highlights a range of terminology that has been developed to describe Crouch's plays, however I disagree with Morin's claim that using the term 'conceptual' in relation to Crouch's theatre erases the historical and cultural "referent[s]" which his plays address, and instead encourages a generic, experiential response that reifies authorial intent. In her analysis of the plays of Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane and Tim Crouch, Morin argues:

It is evident from the critical terminology used to qualify these plays that their endeavours have been misunderstood: the terms 'non-play', 'anti-play', and 'conceptual play' commonly employed in relation to these texts fail to acknowledge the complex legacies which they address. More importantly, the rhetoric of the experiential which underscores such evocations of the 'conceptual' corresponds to an erasure of cultural, artistic, and historical referent, and, as it grows from this absence of referent, critical discourse becomes subsumed into a generic theory of emotions and takes presumed authorial intentionality as its main mode of validation – and in this respect, Crouch's insistence upon presenting his work as 'conceptual' has probably heightened the problem. (83)

Although 'conceptual' does focus on viewer experience, there is no reason to assume the individual's capacity for emotive response to artworks should negate or displace the "cultural, artistic, and historical referent" that such plays are in debt to. The 'conceptual' has a "complex" legacy itself, one that is not only based on "emotions", but includes consideration of culture, history, materiality and process too. In referring to Crouch's work as 'conceptual theatre', I wish to foreground these cultural legacies as a vital element in the critical discourse surrounding his work.

Further, in labelling Crouch's work 'conceptual theatre', rather than erasing the inspiration of the dematerialised art movement, I want to demonstrate that Crouch's work not only partakes in acts of dematerialisation, but also materialisation and rematerialisation too. In a talk during Birkbeck Arts' Week in 2017, Andy Smith discussed the limitations of the term 'dematerialised' in this respect:

Sometimes I think it's a name that works in opposition to actually what it's trying to do. In that actually I think my attempt, or our attempt, is to sometimes rematerialise the theatre. So to think about why we might make theatre, why we might make it now, how it might be made now, in this world. (Smith 'Dematerialising Theatre')

Despite the central focus placed on the term 'dematerialised' by Crouch and Smith, Smith here highlights the issue with making their work fit into this category. It is conceivable that a categorisation of contemporary theatre of the real could claim certain works 'materialise', 'dematerialise', and 'rematerialise' the real. However, there is a danger that

such demarcations would prove too simplistic as most theatre will surely use more than one, if not all three, of these approaches. Therefore, I do not want to use ‘dematerialised theatre’ to describe Crouch’s work, a term that even Smith suggests is becoming less useful as a descriptor. It is my contention that the term ‘conceptual theatre’ is more appropriate for Crouch’s theatre, not only because it highlights the artistic, cultural and historical legacies his work is indebted to, but also because it comprehensively illustrates the audience’s intellectual and emotional experience when watching his plays.

3.6 Presence

3.6.1 *Presence in Tim Crouch’s theatre practice*

Presence, in many forms, is central to Crouch’s work as an indexical trace of the real. Crouch and his collaborators are particularly concerned with presence as a shared space. In several of Crouch’s plays, the shared physical space between the audience and performers is directly acknowledged and referred to. For example, at the beginning of *An Oak Tree*, the Hypnotist provides a short prologue to the play, which begins “[l]adies and gentlemen. Good evening/afternoon. My name is (the name of the actor playing the HYPNOTIST). Welcome to (name of the venue)” (19). These opening lines clearly situate the audience and Crouch alongside each other, in an actual named place. Through naming the venue in which everybody is seated, Crouch highlights the reality of the shared physical space that all are present within. There is no attempt to conceal the mechanics of playmaking, but instead an acknowledgement that everybody is present in the same space together, at the same time. Smith writes “we want to make sure that the position and the presence of the audience are not forgotten” (‘Gentle Acts’ 412). Acknowledging the performer and audience’s shared physical presence is a way to achieve this. In the following chapter I explore how Blythe uses similar technique to highlight the mechanics of production, such as keeping the house lights raised, and explaining her verbatim technique at the start of some shows.

For Crouch and his collaborators, a shared presence is not just about physically occupying the same space as the audience. Crouch begins each performance by attempting to connect with the audience:

So far, every performance of mine (of my own work) has started with a moment of connection with the audience. I walk on stage, I stand, I make contact. This is not a

performed idea of making contact – it’s just me, checking that everyone’s okay, that we’re all in the same place, that we’re ready to start. (in Svich 214)

Crouch explains this approach to performance stems from his “disillusionment in psychologically motivated social realism” where actors pursue character-led rehearsal processes that fail to acknowledge that “the majority of people involved in the act were actually sitting beyond the lights, and that what they brought to the process was equally important, but regularly ignored” (Crouch in Svich 213). This thought is put forward by Jacques Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* which calls for spectators who are “active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them” (13). Rancière has had a demonstrable influence on Crouch’s work, clear from Crouch’s choice of a quotation from this text for an epigraph to introduce *Plays One*. Crouch describes the disenchanting experience of working with an actor who was so absorbed by psychologically breaking down the script “that I never once felt we were ever on the same stage together! There was no understanding from him of the here and now, and certainly no sense of the audience” (Crouch in Svich 212). Crouch’s feeling that he was not on the “same stage” as the other actor, despite physically sharing the same place, indicates that achieving commonality of connection amongst actors goes beyond spatial proximity.

By beginning his performance “with a moment of connection”, Crouch attempts to ensure that, not only is he in the correct mode he requires to begin the performance, but that the audience are ready too. These opening moments establish shared spatial proximity – “that we’re all in the same place” – and shared temporal proximity – “that we’re ready to start”. As I outlined in Chapter One, a shared spatial and temporal proximity are two ways to create a shared presence. Crouch states that this action intends to highlight to the audience that it will be necessary for them to actively engage in the performance:

This ‘levelling-out’ is essential before the play begins. I don’t want the audience to relax into thinking that they are going to be treated to a passive spectacle, a display of technical expertise. Once we’ve achieved this grounding, then the play begins in a shared space, and the audience are truthfully implicated in the experience.

Smith also discusses the potential for theatre to be an actively shared space between performer and audience, and this proposal is a feature of his play *what happens to the hope at the end of the evening* (2013), co-written with Crouch. In this, the character Smith plays (also called Andy) muses on the possibility for theatre to be a “space where we can really be together, sit together and listen to a story” (2). In order to achieve “really be[ing] together”, Crouch and Smith perform certain actions to democratize the space between themselves and

the audience: they “*enter from the same door as the audience*” (1) and, before any lines of the play are uttered, “*ANDY looks to the audience and turns the page*” (1). These actions acknowledge that this piece of theatre intends to be a place of shared experience amongst the performers and audience.

One of the ways Crouch attempts to create a shared moment of presence with an audience is not only during the first few moments on stage, but also his actions backstage. Crouch never warms up before performing in his plays, stating:

It’s important that the play begins and ends in real life. I felt this particularly with *My Arm*. If I did a warmup before a performance, then it put me in an artificial state which didn’t help the play at all. (Crouch in Svich 217)

Interestingly, he uses the term “real life” to describe how he wants the play to begin and end. Crouch acknowledges there is a “real life” external to the world of the play, yet also that he believes his actions transpose this “real life” into the auditorium, in order to avoid an “artificial state” of performance. Crouch argues that certain theatrical movements promote “a notion of being ‘in the moment’ [...] all about relaxed shoulders and loose knees and being ‘present’ in an actorly way” (Crouch in Svich 216). It is important to note that the “being ‘present’ in an actorly way” that Crouch derides is not the form of presence to which I refer. He uses this term to describe heightened, perfected performances which elide “human imperfection”, and states he wants *An Oak Tree* to “create a place where those imperfections can be acknowledged and celebrated” (Crouch in Svich 216). For Crouch, achieving a shared presence with the audience appears a way for him to acknowledge the “real life” external to the theatre, and ensure that this real is present throughout the performance. It also clarifies why his work should be understood as conceptual theatre – a theatre of shared ideas and experience rooted in the present moment. In this way, presence, for Crouch, operates as an indexical trace of the real.

Following this brief introduction of how Crouch’s work engages ideas of presence in order to indexically point to the real, I will explore this further in relation to *An Oak Tree*.

3.6.2 *An Oak Tree, presence in absence: content*

A key way Crouch uses presence in his work is through highlighting and contrasting two different forms of presence: material presence and immaterial presence. These are two different traces of the real, as I will unfold. In *An Oak Tree*, Dawn and Andy grieve for their

daughter Claire in profoundly different ways: Dawn attaches herself to the material presence of Claire, and Andy attaches himself to immaterial presence. In Scene 5, Andy describes how, after Claire is killed, Dawn clings “to material evidence” (51). Dawn finds comfort in proximity to the physical presence of objects connected to her daughter and copes with Claire’s death through equating her with the material world: “[t]o her, Claire was a hair left on a bar of soap, some flowers taped to a lamp post. She was the photograph that hung above the piano” (51). For Dawn, these objects act as evidence that Claire was once alive. She is comforted by the tiniest and most mundane (yet recognisable) corporeal remnant of a hair “on a bar of soap” as material evidence of her daughter’s former presence. Presence here also connects to the archive: in Chapter One I explained how an archive “is to do with longing an appropriation” and in this section the audience witness how Andy and Dawn’s longing for Claire’s presence prompts them to seek her in different places (Steedman 81).

Andy describes how he grieves differently to Dawn. He considers Claire has “multiplied”:

FATHER: Dawn went to the mortuary. I refused. If anything in those first few days, Claire had multiplied. She had become cloned! She was between lines, inside circles, hiding beneath angles. She was indentations in time, physical depressions, imperfections on surfaces. She was the spaces beneath the chairs. (51)

Dawn needs “material evidence” that is physically present, whilst Andy finds Claire in absences: spaces “between”, “inside” and “hiding”. The language he uses reminds of Heiner Goebbels description of a theatre of absence, as discussed in Chapter One, “spaces in-between, spaces of discovery, spaces in which emotion, imagination and reflection can actually take place” (4). For Andy, these seemingly absent, empty places are where Claire is most present for him. For Dawn, the material presence is the indexical trace of Claire’s reality, whereas for Andy the immaterial presence provides him with an indexical trace of Claire’s reality. Dawn connects to physical objects, whereas Andy connects to abstractions and geometrical shapes. The two diverse responses represent two distinct ways to cope with and process a tragedy: materially, and conceptually. Following Linda Patrik’s distinction of archival practice explored in Chapter One, Dawn seeks the ‘fossil record’ of remains of the material, whilst Andy relies on the ‘textual record’ - reading “an interpretation *into*” a tree (Thomas 59). It could be said that Andy engages with an “archaeological poetics”, as

conceived by Julian Thomas, which “involves finding ways of expressing and taking the measure of something which is absent” (77).

The Father’s description of Claire’s presence is unmistakably artistic. Claire is “between lines, inside circles, hiding beneath angles” (51). For Love, “her physical existence (at least in her Father’s mind) is replaced by a series of artistic representations or metamorphoses” (Love 9). The Father’s artistic conceptualisation of his grieving experience begins in Scene 3 when he and the Hypnotist offer their individual perspectives on the night that Claire died. Much like Dawn, the Hypnotist’s lines contain only the material, literal facts of his experience:

HYPNOTIST: I was driving a Ford Focus estate. 1.6 Litres.
The car was good. The brakes were good.
ABS. Airbags. In the back, speakers, sound
board, microphones, costumes. My lights
were on. November. (42)³²

Alternatively, the Father’s lines contain expressive images of colour:

FATHER: That night. That night has a colour, a touch
and a sound. Dawn was back. We waited
for Claire. We delayed supper for Claire.
We stood at the door for Claire. Marcy was
watching The Simpsons.

Blue. We delayed supper in blue. We stood
at the door in lilac. We brushed against each
other in slate grey. We looked at our watches
in yellow. Dusk. (42)

By placing the two responses side by side (both physically on stage – the “*HYPNOTIST and the FATHER stand side by side*” – and vocally as text), Crouch offers the audience two different experiences of presence (42). The Hypnotist describes a literal view about what can factually be seen and materially known. This is presence as a shared spatial proximity with other objects. The overloading of different colours suggests a heightened experience, and Bottoms notes that the Father’s experience implies “a weirdly disjunctive synaesthesia” (‘Authorizing...’ 69). Synaesthesia occurs when two or more of the five senses that are normally separately experienced are joined together: for example, people taste colours, or hear smells. Not only has the Father’s view of the world been conceptually altered by his

³² In the original script, the car is a Renault Laguna (*Plays One* 80).

tragedy, but his senses have too. Further, it appears his memory is tintured by this new way of seeing. He recalls his memory of finding out that Claire had died in a conceptual way. For Andy, death is personified as a policeman:

FATHER: Death. Death walked through into the lounge. He put his helmet on the piano stool, spoke to us in silver. He then pronounced two concrete blocks in black and left them to hang inside my ribcage, pushing against my lungs. Where they remain to this day. (43)

The artistic language that the Father uses to describe the evening of Claire's death suggests a change in how he views the world. He states that, when he asks Dawn if she thinks he "should go to the doctors" to discuss removing the "concrete blocks" that are "inside" his "ribcage", Dawn screams "[w]here's my fucking husband gone?" (43). Dawn does not recognise her husband's behaviour, which suggests that, before Claire's death, he did not engage with the world in this conceptual way. Further, her use of the question "where" implies that Andy's actions have altered his identity in her mind: even though he is physically present, the husband that she recognises is absent. This is crucial to note because, even though Dawn appears to be vehemently opposed to Andy's conceptualisation of his daughter – "[i]t's like some abstract intellectual fucking concept for you, isn't it" (61) – her displacement of Andy in this moment suggests she also has a profound capacity for transformation in her mind. Of course, her own name, Dawn, is not only the English word for the moment just before sunrise, but is also a verb that relates to what is suddenly perceived by the mind: a *dawning* realisation.

The most radical transformation that the Father suggests, which causes the tension in his relationship with Dawn, is his insistence that he has changed an oak tree into his daughter:

FATHER I came to the roadside. I needed a hug from my girl. I looked at a tree. A tree by the roadside. I touched it. And from the hollows and the spaces, I scooped up the properties of Claire and changed the physical substance of the tree into that of my daughter. (51-2)

In this section, the Father again highlights his longing for Claire ("I needed a hug from my girl") and the tree can be considered the archive he creates of her. In Chapter One I highlighted Steedman's argument that the archive "is to do with longing", and here Crouch

shows the Father's attempt to bestow meaning on something to produce an 'archive' of Claire (81).

In order to analyse this crucial sequence of the play in relation to presence, which I will then compare to Crouch's use of the second actor, it is necessary to describe the piece of art that inspired this moment: *An Oak Tree* (1973), a sculpture by Michael Craig-Martin, and its artistic antecedents – in particular, the work of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968).

3.8 The 'readymade' form

Michael Craig-Martin is an Irish artist who was born in Dublin in 1941.³³ A distinguishing feature of his work is the use of everyday objects: "Craig-Martin uses images of representations of objects. Those could be loaded with meaning – including art historical references [...] – or have none" (Cork 'Inhale/Exhale...' 1). Since the 1970s, Craig-Martin has worked with black adhesive tape and large-scale wall-drawings that have become identified as his signature style (Cork 'Inhale/Exhale...' 9). These images are usually vividly coloured (though sometimes they are black and white outlines), and are often layered one on top of one another, or placed seemingly randomly together. He often depicts common and functional domestic objects and a clear example of these elements of Craig-Martin's work can be identified in his piece *History I* (2001) which features the black overlapping outlines of recognisable domestic objects including a toilet and a lamp, with three objects filled in bright block colour.



Fig. 3. Michael Craig-Martin, *History I* (2001), Gallery Neptune & Brown, Washington DC.

³³ Craig-Martin grew up in wartime London, visiting Dublin sporadically. He studied English Literature and History at Fordham University, worked in Paris, and then attended the Yale University School of Art and Architecture to study painting (Cork 28; Button 61). He lives and works in London, and has had a long association with Goldsmiths College, University of London, where he is now Emeritus Professor (*On Being An Artist* 141). In April 2015, Craig-Martin's most recent book, *On Being An Artist*, was published.

The objects are depicted in a simplistic way, with little detail and just the main features of the objects apparent, in order to be instantly recognisable: “[h]e deals with pictorial objects by reducing them to just enough characteristics to be regarded as individual objects and just few enough to be read as universals” (Hentschel 14). The move towards simplicity is seen by some art critics to be inspired by the minimalism movement in the visual arts, which attempted to strip everything down to its bare essentials. Craig-Martin is described as “a reductionist” of this kind because the era in which he began working is one in which the Minimal Art movement began to evolve, as both a completion, and reaction to, the reductive aspects of modernism: “[b]y the mid-1960s, Minimal Art had become established in the New York avant-garde” (Hentschel 14; Perry and Wood 8). Craig-Martin’s use of bold, clean lines, essential images and insistence on “ease and lightness” all tie in with the similar ideals of the minimalism movement (Cork ‘Inhale/Exhale...’ 9).

Craig-Martin explicitly states that his use of everyday objects is inspired by the work of the French-American artist Marcel Duchamp and claims Duchamp “has been the most influential artist of the second half of the twentieth century” (Craig-Martin in Cork, *Michael Craig-Martin* 150). In his art, Duchamp used found objects.³⁴ His most notorious readymade is *Fountain* (1917), a porcelain urinal signed ‘R. Mutt’, the “first Readymade ever shown in public” (Hentschel 18).³⁵ Duchamp provided the art-world with “the Duchampian idea of the readymade: the object that ‘becomes art’ by virtue of an act of selection or nomination – and through the absorption of that by the artworld” (Perry and Wood 72).



Fig. 4. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (replica 1964), Tate Modern, London.

³⁴ Examples of Duchamp’s ‘readymades’ include: *Pulled at 4 pins* (1915), an unpainted chimney ventilator; *Comb* (1916), a dog’s grooming comb; *Traveller’s Folding Item* (1916), a typewriter cover, and *Fountain* (1917), a urinal.

³⁵ Craig-Martin himself has honoured Duchamp’s *Fountain* by including an orange and pink image of it in an exhibition (Hentschel 16). Other famous conceptual artists, including Jeff Koons and Sherrie Levine, have also drawn upon Duchamp’s legacy, replaying *Fountain* in their own artworks (Perry and Wood 31).

Craig-Martin's most renowned work, *An Oak Tree*, develops the idea of Duchamp's readymades.³⁶ This artwork comprises two interlinked separate elements: a glass shelf with a transparent glass of water placed upon it, and an accompanying printed text on the wall. When *An Oak Tree* was first exhibited, the shelf was positioned "high and alone on an otherwise empty wall, it could not be reached by anyone eager to sample the water or dislodge the entire critical ensemble" (Cork 'Inhale/Exhale...' 8). At viewer height the printed text was in the "inflammatory" colour red (Cork *Michael Craig-Martin*, 13).



Fig. 5. Michael Craig-Martin, *An Oak Tree* (1973), michaelcraigmartin.co.uk

The printed text echoes labels placed next to artworks in galleries, which describe displayed items. This text "appears to be a series of questions posed to the artist, and his answers" (Rebellato 133). In this text, the artist explains that they have changed the glass of water into an oak tree:

Q. To begin with, could you describe this work?

A. Yes, of course. What I've done is change a glass of water into a full-grown oak tree without altering the accidents of the glass of water.

Q. The accidents?

A. Yes. The colour, feel, weight, size... (Craig-Martin, *On Being...* 131)

³⁶ This artwork was created in 1973 and it was first shown at London's Rowan Gallery in 1974, and also at Oliver Dowling's avant-garde gallery in Dublin, 1977 (Nusser in Hentschel, 58; Cork 'Inhale/Exhale...', 8; Walker, *Landscapes*).

The art historian and critic Richard Cork describes the piece as “a defining moment in the development of conceptual art” (*Michael Craig-Martin* 16). Cork highlights that Craig-Martin’s choice of a glass of water for *An Oak Tree* advances the idea of the readymade:

Duchamp, choosing a urinal, a bicycle wheel and a hat-rack as his ready-mades, had lighted on things that still possessed a defiant and unexpected allure. A glass of water, by contrast, seems the epitome of ordinary, humdrum existence. It is the ultimate example of something we take for granted. (*Michael Craig-Martin* 16)

This suggests Craig-Martin sought to adapt Duchamp’s approach to readymades by transforming an extremely commonplace object (a glass of water) in an unexpected way (into an oak tree).

Both Duchamp and Craig-Martin have influenced the work of Tim Crouch. In particular, as stated, Crouch’s play is directly inspired by the philosophical and artistic ideas of Craig-Martin’s artwork. Even the cover illustration for Crouch’s collected plays, published by Oberon, suggests that Craig-Martin’s work is of importance to Crouch’s entire oeuvre. Designed by his wife, the novelist and artist Julia Crouch, the image depicts a black line drawing of Crouch’s head and neck, his hand reaching forwards. This image is placed on a white background. It is unmistakably in the style of Craig-Martin’s original black and white line drawings, made with crêpe tape. Some of the writing on the cover is in the colour red, the colour that Craig-Martin’s text for *An Oak Tree* is displayed in.

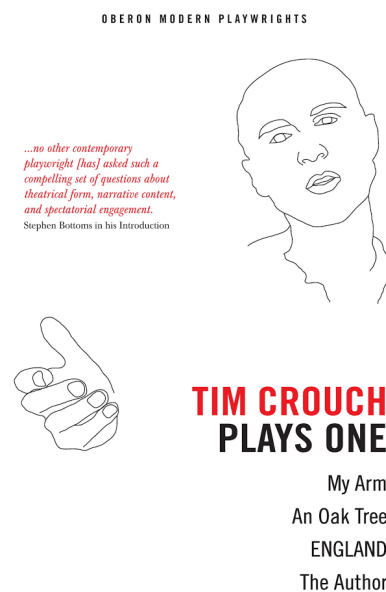


Fig. 6. Julia Crouch, Cover Design (2011), Oberon Books, London.

This homage to Craig-Martin does more than just speak to the obvious connection between Crouch and Craig-Martin. It serves to reinforce that all of Crouch's work aspires to the philosophical and artistic attributes of Craig-Martin's line drawings. Craig-Martin describes his line drawings as an attempt to "reflect the character of the objects they represented, to act as a kind of pictorial readymade" (*On Being...* 169). In describing his drawings as "pictorial readymade[s]", Craig-Martin acknowledges the influence of Duchamp's readymades, "to introduce the non-aesthetic aspects of visual experience into the language of art" (*On Being...* 58). It establishes Craig-Martin's belief in the importance of fusing the visual and conceptual and stressing the relevance of viewer involvement. Central to Craig-Martin's line drawings of objects is that they can be "recognized instantly" by the viewer (*On Being...* 171). For Craig-Martin, the simplicity of the design allows viewers to bring their own knowledge and opinions to the artistic experience:

It is extraordinary how much knowledge people bring to these works without realizing it. Regardless of the form or setting, I can make a representation of an object out of a few lines and they will instantly know what it is, what it is for, what it is made of [...] And yet I have not provided any of that information – the viewer has. [...] The simplest images can trigger vast stores of knowledge. (*On Being...* 172)

Tim Crouch performs in the majority of his work and his appearance is therefore more recognisable than most playwrights – he is a white, tall, bald man, with an expressive face. In *An Oak Tree*, he describes himself: "I've got a red face, a bald head and bony shoulders" (59); (note the importance of the colour red, again). Therefore, for those who have seen Crouch perform, Julia Crouch's line drawing on the book cover is instantly recognisable as Crouch, despite its simplicity. Just as Craig-Martin's simplistic black-tape images quickly denote familiar objects, Julia Crouch's drawing immediately signals Tim Crouch. The choice of this cover image points towards Crouch's shared belief with Craig-Martin in the value of reduction and simplicity. This position underpins all of Crouch's work: a belief that audiences do not require a great deal of visual information to make conceptual transformations.³⁷

³⁷ The belief in not requiring a large amount of visual information to affect conceptual transformation was also a feature of rehearsals for Crouch's *Adler & Gibb*, which I observed. An extended exercise that Crouch instructed the actors to undertake intended to reveal the effect of artistic reduction. Crouch instructed the company to sit at tables, facing opposite a partner. The first instruction was to "draw a portrait of your partner" in thirty seconds but without looking at your pencil and paper: eyes should only remain studying your partner. The second stage of the exercise was the same as the first, but drawers were given only five seconds to complete their portraits. In comparing each drawing, it was interesting to note that the one that took five seconds was often just as expressive and recognisable as the actor's partner, as the one that took thirty seconds. Crouch indicated that the

In his introduction to the updated text of *An Oak Tree*, Rebellato highlights Crouch's interest in Duchamp, who, as stated, directly inspired Craig-Martin:

An artist that Tim Crouch likes to refer to is Marcel Duchamp, one of the first artists to place concepts at the centre of his work, who made an important distinction between retinal art and conceptual art. Retinal art is grasped mainly through the eyes (on the retina); conceptual art is grasped with the mind. (6)

In Crouch's *An Oak Tree*, the Father's viewpoint is not associated with what he can grasp "through the eyes", but with what he can grasp "with the mind", the foundation of conceptual art. The Hypnotist's viewpoint demonstrates "retinal art": art that is purely visual, a view of what is literally and materially in front of a person. Through these two different viewpoints, Crouch demonstrates that there are several options for ways to engage with the reality of the world.

3.9 Artistic transubstantiation

This section introduces the idea of transubstantiation, in order to explain how it is crucial to both the content and form of *An Oak Tree*. A significant and important parallel between both Craig-Martin and Crouch's transformative oak trees is their preoccupation with the religious idea of transubstantiation. In his Richard Dimpleby Lecture on 23 November 2000, Sir Nicholas Serota stated:

We may not 'like' Craig-Martin's work, but it certainly reminds us that the appreciation of all art involves an act of faith comparable [to the belief] that, through transubstantiation, the bread and wine of Holy Communion become the body and blood of Christ. (in Harris 198)

Mick Brown labels Craig-Martin "art's high priest of ordinary things", a description accurate of his background (Brown *The Telegraph*). Craig-Martin was raised as Catholic and this upbringing was central to his early life, though he lost his faith "suddenly and irrevocably" aged nineteen (Brown *The Telegraph*; Cork 16). Despite losing his faith, Catholic ideas still pervade his work. In order to more deeply understand the role that transubstantiation plays in

exercise was about the power of reduction and encouraging freedom within a restriction. To my mind, this exercise encouraged the actors to respond to their subjects with the simplicity of Craig-Martin's line-drawings.

both Craig-Martin and Crouch's work, it is important to outline the concept further, in terms of its religious significance.³⁸

Transubstantiation is a central principle of the Catholic faith which describes the belief that, during the giving and receiving of Communion between priest and parishioner, the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ, despite retaining their appearance as bread and wine. The moment of transubstantiation is the work of the priest, a gift bestowed by God in the presence of parishioners, and the bread and wine are then distributed to the people. The most famous discussion of transubstantiation comes from Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa Theologiae* (1485). He recognises it is difficult for people to understand this particular sacrament because the material objects of the bread and wine do not appear to visually transfigure: “[t]he outward appearances of bread and wine don’t seem to cause the body of Christ, whether we mean his actual body (signified-and-sign) or his mystical body (signified-and-not-sign)” (568). In Crouch’s *An Oak Tree*, Andy transubstantiates Claire into an oak tree, but Dawn does not accept this, not least because no visual transfiguration of the oak tree has taken place. Andy’s actions, and the sacrament of transubstantiation, rely on an acceptance of presence in absence: that is, though a physical body may appear to be absent, the presence of Claire and Jesus are held to really exist. In Catholic theology, the “real presence of Christ” is a term used to describe the belief that Jesus is present in the Eucharist, not symbolically but literally. In his theological writings, Aquinas highlights that transubstantiation is not powered by sensory perception, and instead the receiver’s faith is required to acknowledge the change: “[t]hat this sacrament contains the actual body and blood of Christ cannot be perceived with our own senses but only by faith in God’s authority” (571). This directly correlates with Duchamp’s “important distinction between retinal art and conceptual art”: retinal art relies on sensory perception, whereas conceptual art requires an act of faith by the viewer. In the content of *An Oak Tree*, Andy transubstantiates an oak tree into his daughter, and Crouch requires the audience to engage in a similar act of faith in order to see the character of Andy in the presence of the second actor, which this next section unfolds.

3.10 An Oak Tree, presence in absence: form

³⁸ The strong connection between Crouch and Smith’s work and religious rituals formed part of my paper given at the ‘What Happens Now: 21st Century Writing in English Conference’ (2014), titled ‘Allegorizing presence in contemporary post-dramatic theatre: Tim Crouch and Andy Smith’s *what happens to the hope at the end of the evening...*’. In this paper I compared Crouch and Smith’s use of presence, and the understanding of presence in the Christian tradition.

In *An Oak Tree*, the form of the play (using a second actor who is unrehearsed and responding intuitively) uniquely supports the content. Crouch has used the term ‘presence in absence’ on Twitter to describe what happens in *An Oak Tree*:



Fig. 7. Tweet between Crouch and audience member (16 Aug. 2015).

The way that Crouch ensures an audience viscerally feels the emotional impact of Andy’s transubstantiation of Claire into an oak tree is through the dramaturgical device of the second actor. In the notes given to actors considering playing the second actor, Crouch explains that the inclusion of the second actor “intricately and importantly supports the play’s fictional story” (*Plays One* 55). The device of the unrehearsed presence of the second actor is critical to the emotional impact of the play’s story.

In Scene 1, the Hypnotist asks the second actor to repeat lines:

HYPNOTIST: Can I ask you just to look at me.

Ask me what I’m being. Say, ‘What are you being?’

FATHER: What are you being?

HYPNOTIST: I’m being a hypnotist.

Look.

I’m fifty-one years old. I’ve got a red face, a bald head and bony shoulders. (*This must be an accurate description of the actor playing the*

HYPNOTIST.)

Look.

I'm wearing these clothes.

Now ask who you are, say 'And me?'

FATHER: And me?

HYPNOTIST: You're a father. Your name's Andy. You're 46 years old, you're six foot two. Your lips are cracked. Your fingernails are dirty. You're wearing a crumpled Gore-tex jacket. Your trousers are muddy say, your shoes are muddy. You have tremors. You're unshaven. Your hair is greying. You have a bloodshot eye.

That's great! You're doing really well. (59)

In this exchange, Crouch offers the audience two different perceptive viewpoints: retinal and conceptual. The Hypnotist describes himself accurately in a way that matches what the audience can actually see: he offers "*an accurate description*" of his own characteristics. In the notes to the play, Crouch writes "HYPNOTIST in silver waistcoat, cape, etc" (56). This suggests that the Hypnotist wears a costume clearly indicating his profession. In contrast, the second actor wears "whatever everyday clothes the actor chooses to wear" (56). These "everyday clothes" the second actor wears will be visually different from the description of the "crumpled Gore-tex jacket" that the Hypnotist describes: they will be visually real for an audience (both because they are the actor's real clothes and not a costume, and also because they can be visually seen), whereas the Gore-tex jacket will have to be imagined. Further, the second actor's physical appearance, their gender, and age, indeed all of their physical characteristics, will be notably different from the distinct description of Andy the Hypnotist offers.³⁹ After delivering the long description of the Father, the Hypnotist says "[t]hat's great! You're doing really well!" (59). This wry line implies the second actor has done something to affect a change into the Father. It highlights Crouch's belief that the second actor does not

³⁹ A further example of this difference is that in the original script, Crouch gave the Hypnotist's age as "forty-two" to reflect his actual age (*Plays One* 59), and updated this to "I'm fifty-one years old" for the revised version (*An Oak Tree: 10th Anniversary Edition* 21). The age of the Father remains the same in both versions.

need to ‘do’ anything to become the Father – the work takes place in the minds of the audience.⁴⁰

The repetition of the directive ‘look’ conveys Crouch’s intention for the audience to recognise different perspectives.⁴¹ The first entry for ‘look’ in the *OED* is:

The action or an act of looking; an act of directing the eyes or countenance in order to look at someone or something; a glance of the eyes. Also in extended use: an act of contemplating or examining an immaterial or abstract thing.

Again, Duchamp’s distinction between retinal art and conceptual art is recalled with this definition: one refers to the physical act of guiding the eyes at an object, the other refers to abstract contemplation. Crouch uses these different meanings throughout *An Oak Tree* to repeatedly reinforce that ‘looking’ can take place both through the eyes, and in the mind. He asks the second actor to “look me in the eyes and say, ‘Please help me’” (72). This use of the word ‘look’ as an instruction to the second actor clearly relates to the practical action of looking. However, in other parts of the script, ‘look’ refers to a conceptual way of seeing. For example, before Andy conceptually transforms the oak tree into Claire, he says “I looked at a tree” (89). Later in the script, Andy is stood by the roadside, insisting to Dawn that the tree is Claire. At this point in the play, the Hypnotist plays the part of Dawn and holds a chair against his hip, which represents the youngest daughter Marcia. The two performers are looking at a piano stool, which represents the oak tree by the side of the road: “[t]he HYPNOTIST positions the FATHER in relation to the piano stool and takes away his script” (100). The two different ways of looking and seeing are used: Dawn says, “[s]he’s not here” and Andy replies, “[y]ou can’t see” (101). Dawn insists: “[w]e all have to deal with this. Cope with this. We have to get on. See things for what they are” (101). Dawn’s instruction to Andy to “[s]ee things for what they are” has a double meaning: she wants him to see the oak tree as

⁴⁰ In his TedX talk, ‘The Art of the Autosuggestion’, Crouch discussed how *Self Mastery Through Conscious Autosuggestion: The Conscious Self and The Unconscious Self*, by the French pharmacist Emile Coue, “inspired and helped crystallise a lot of ideas for me when I was writing a play called *An Oak Tree*”. Crouch explains autosuggestion is a subconscious imaginative act which Coue defines “as the act of implanting an idea in oneself, by oneself” so that “every one of our thoughts becomes concrete, materialises, becomes – in short – a reality” (TedX). In *Self Mastery Through Conscious Autosuggestion* Coue writes “autosuggestion is nothing but hypnotism as I see it” (9), and, for Crouch, relating hypnotism to art is generative because hypnotists work with “people who are open and suggestible”, similar to a receptive theatre audience (TedX).

⁴¹ The two meanings of the word ‘look’ are also an important feature of Crouch’s play, *ENGLAND*. ‘Look’ is mostly used to direct the audience’s attention to an image that they must imagine: “[l]ook! Look! Here you can see me in the night.” (114). However, the character describes how their boyfriend, “says good art is art that sells. He’s taught me the difference between looking and seeing” (128). Here, ‘looking’ refers to the physical action of guiding the eyes to an artwork, whilst ‘seeing’ refers to a conceptual way to appreciate it.

an oak tree, but also accept that Claire has died. Andy insists that Dawn is the one not 'seeing' properly:

HYPNOTIST Point at the piano stool.
 Say, 'Look, Dawn, look.'

FATHER: Look, Dawn, look.

HYPNOTIST: Say, 'It's not a tree anymore.'

FATHER: It's not a tree anymore.

HYPNOTIST: Say, 'You're not looking.'

FATHER: You're not looking.

HYPNOTIST: Say, I've changed it into Claire.

FATHER: I've changed it into Claire.

HYPNOTIST: I say, 'Our girl is dead love. She's dead'.
 I say, 'That is a tree, I am your wife, this
 is your daughter, that is a road. This is what
 matters. This. This is what we have to deal
 with. This.' (101-102)

Andy's insistence that Dawn is "not looking" reveals the tension between two different, perhaps incompatible, perceptual realms. There are two different realities at play here: a conceptual reality and a material reality. However, this also serves to remind the audience of the different perceptual layers of theatre. At this moment, Crouch is representing Dawn, the second actor represents the Father, a piano stool represents the oak tree (which the Father claims is Claire) and the chair Crouch holds represents Marcy, the younger daughter. In the same way that viewers of Craig-Martin's artwork are asked to see an oak tree in a glass of water, the theatre audience are asked to see objects and people within other objects, and the character of the Father within the second actor. In asking the audience to imaginatively make these conceptual substitutions, Crouch highlights the potential of theatre as a space of conceptual transubstantiation. It is important to note Dawn's repetition of the pronoun 'this', a word used to indicate and emphasise something. Bottoms suggests that "Dawn's passionate insistence on *this* material reality is somewhat undermined by the fact that her lines are performed by Crouch himself" (65). The idea of the material 'this' is placed alongside a

conceptual ‘this’: Bottoms describes this moment as “harrowingly moving” (66). It allows the audience to reassess the importance that they pin on material reality, over other possible sorts of transformative internal realities that cannot be ‘looked’ at or ‘seen’ with the eyes. In this way, the presence of the second actor allows Crouch to present the audience with the idea that conceptual thought can be just as powerful as a material object in working as an indexical trace of the real.

3.11 Archive

For the second actor, key to their own transformative experience of ‘becoming’ the character of the Father is the presence of the text that they make use of throughout the performance. During the performance, Crouch encourages the actor to use the speeches in the text as something to assimilate in their own personal way: “[t]ake your time. Make them your own. Feel your way” (104). One key change that Crouch made to the text of *An Oak Tree* in the updated version was to include a couple of lines that made it clear to the audience and second actor that everything is scripted, and not improvised. The second actor asks Crouch “[h]ow free am I?” and Crouch replies “every word we speak is scripted, but otherwise – ” (*An Oak Tree* 21). The “but otherwise” disclaimer, tagged on to the end of the line, with an dash makes the case that the script is only one part of the actor’s creative arsenal, and should not restrict artistic freedom. Crouch explains how he hoped highlighting the presence of the script would encourage the audience to think about it as something that offers the actor possibilities, as opposed to restrictions: “I really want you as an audience to know that every word I speak is scripted, and that’s not reductive or prohibitive or restrictive in any way, I think it’s quite the opposite, it’s actually super freeing” (Crouch ‘Are We On The Same Page’). For Crouch, the script is crucial, but it is incomplete without the actor and audience’s interpretative agency.

Crouch also asserts “[t]he text is not the thing. The text is a series of residues, I suppose, of the thing” (‘Are We On The Same Page’). The word “residue” suggests the material remainder of something, as though the text is the leftover part of a fuller and complete whole. In this way, the presence of the text in *An Oak Tree* is reminiscent of archival evidence operating as a “textual record”, as understood by Linda Patrik (Thomas 56), which I introduced in Chapter One. Julian Thomas highlights that the textual record is something which “we read an interpretation *into*” (59). The dominant visual presence of the text in the hands of the second actor promotes the idea of the text as a kind of archive: it is ready for interpretation, just as Craig-Martin’s glass of water awaits interpretation. The different ways

of performing the same text that each second actor will discover reveals that there are many different interpretations of an archive. The second actor is the archivist who comes to interpret the archival residue of Crouch's script. In this way, the presence of the script acts as an indexical trace of the real in performance: it is, in fact, the technology through which the second actor brings their instinctual self to the performance. Because the second actor has never seen the script before, Crouch hopes that this will enable an "open-ness" to their performance: "I talk them through ideas of open-ness on stage. I say that all I'm requesting is for them to bring their instinct on stage – to respond in each moment to the reality they find themselves in" (Crouch in Svich 216).

The freedom of the actor to interpret the script and communicate with Crouch suggests the live presence of the second actor operates as an indexical trace of the real in Crouch's play: "there are acts of genuine communication between me and the second actor [...] These are not rehearsed moments of communication; we haven't spent six weeks working to make them look real; they ARE real!" (Crouch in Svich 223-224). Crouch contends that the rehearsed nature of theatre that intends to present itself as realist may aesthetically achieve that aim, but the shared "moments of communication" between the actors on stage will only be illusory. He makes the case that in *An Oak Tree* the unfamiliarity of the script for the second actor encourages genuine, unstaged moments of shared presence between the two actors and that this shared presence points indexically towards the real. In this way, Crouch's *An Oak Tree* is a clear example of the extradiegetic real in theatre – a play which foregrounds construction of the real as one of its central focuses, and in which reflection on the real happens alongside (though is entwined with) the central narrative.

The possibility for the second actor to interpret and perform Crouch's script in a variety of ways lays the foundation for the narrative in which Dawn and Andy interpret the material residues of their daughter in different ways. Dawn clings to the material residues of Claire, "hair left of a bar of soap", and other material indicators that indicate Claire was once physically present: "some flowers" someone placed as a mark of remembrance, her image in a "photograph" (89). As I highlighted in Chapter One when discussing the archive, Susan Sontag argues for the importance of photographs as "artifacts" which "have the status of found objects – unpremeditated slices on the world" (*On Photography* 69). Photographs are what Geoffrey Elton would term "present traces of the past" (20), and for Dawn a photograph is a material trace of Claire's past reality. Andy rejects Dawn's material archive of Claire, in favour of the metaphysical: "these things were no more of Claire than of anyone else. A photograph just looked like other photographs. Whilst I had the real thing!" (89). Presumably,

“the real thing” refers to what is “of Claire”. The preposition “of” suggests Andy is considering what can be defined as Claire’s key components, substance and identity. What seems to be at stake in Dawn and the Father’s argument is the essence of Claire’s being. The Father’s use of the phrase “the real thing” is interesting. A “thing” can denote a material object, but also something that it is hard to define, or give a name to. By claiming that he has “the real thing”, the Father challenges where, and how, the “real” can be found. Establishing this tension within form and narrative allows Crouch to explore fundamental philosophical questions about the nature of being and meaning. The second actor’s choice of *how* to interpret the archival ‘residue’ of the script provides the embodied understanding of the interpretative choices made by the characters in the story.

3.12 Technology

It is not only the physical presence of the script which highlights and aids the second actor’s transformative potential in *An Oak Tree*; the electrical communicative devices that Crouch uses to instruct them are also crucial to their performance experience. These devices are clearly visible on stage from the start of the performance. In the notes to the play, the stage set up clearly denotes these pieces of equipment: “[o]ne handheld wireless microphone. Bold print indicates speech through a microphone” and “[a]n onstage sound system and speakers” (56). These visible pieces of technology serve several dramaturgical purposes. Firstly, they help support the narrative of the stage hypnotist talking through the microphone to his audience at his gig in the pub. Secondly, the presence of the equipment on stage that is used to support and create the performance functions in a similar way to the presence of the script on stage: it highlights the scripted nature of the piece, and the presence of the author on stage. The presence of this technology in *An Oak Tree* works in the same way as the presence of the earphones in Blythe’s *Little Revolution*: they remind the audience of the constructed nature of the theatrical experience and the reality that is external to the story of the play.

The most important utilisation of technology in *An Oak Tree* is the second actor’s use of headphones and a wireless pack through which Crouch directs their words and actions: “[a]t times, the second actor will wear iPhone/iPod headphones connected to a wireless receiver – this enables the HYPNOTIST to speak to the second actor through a microphone without the audience hearing” (56).⁴² At various moments in the performance, although the

⁴² The original script indicates that as technology has advanced, so has the use of it in this production – a “Walkman/iPod” is mentioned, as opposed to an iPhone (*Plays One* 56).

audience can see Crouch speak into the microphone to the second actor, they cannot hear what instruction he is giving: “[t]he HYPNOTIST talks to the FATHER through the earphones – inaudible to the audience” (71). The second actor relies on the communicative technology and residual script to provide them with the framework within which they can engage their real responses. The script (archive) and headphones (technology) are the indexical traces of the real in performance: the processes which point towards what Crouch (and possibly the audience) consider to be the real – the presence and performance of the second actor. Tom Cantrell has noted that there are moments in *An Oak Tree* which mirror Blythe’s recorded delivery repetition:

Both actors hear the play through headphones, and repeat the words as in Recorded Delivery’s productions. In all performances, Crouch played the hypnotist and so knew the words and the story. The father was played by a different guest star at each performance, who knew nothing about the play, the plot or the character; they simply reacted to the words they heard and the unfolding story. The difference between Crouch’s [approach] and Blythe’s is that [it is] predicated on the performer knowing very little, if anything, about the event. By contrast, in Recorded Delivery’s productions, the actors rehearse with the audio and thus become familiar with it. (173n1)

As far as I am aware, Cantrell is mistaken in stating that Crouch and the second actor hear the play through their headphones: occasionally, Crouch feeds lines to the second actor, but neither of them are played a recording of the play. However, Cantrell’s comparison points towards, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, an awareness that, in theatre, recorded and repeated audio suggest an authenticity that is understood as enhancing the liveness of the experience. As Cantrell states, the second actor knows “nothing about the play, the plot or the character”, and, for an actor, this creates precarity, which is central to the meaning of *An Oak Tree*.

3.13 Precarity in *An Oak Tree*

An Oak Tree explores and performs precarity in content and form. Firstly, the content of the play describes the experience of existential precarity following a traumatic event, as articulated by Butler. Secondly, the form of the play performs precarity through showing the audience the precarious experience of the second actor attempting to navigate their way through an unfamiliar script.⁴³ Crouch aims for these two precarities to symbiotically support and illuminate each other. Crouch intends to reveal the close link between the real and

⁴³ This section focuses on precarity, as understood by Butler, and not precarity as the condition of life under neoliberalism, which Berlant is concerned with (although, as Chapter Two elucidated, the two are connected).

precarity: for the characters and audience, precarity leads to a destabilisation of reality.

In *An Oak Tree*, the unpredictability of the fatal car accident is an example of precarity, as defined by Judith Butler. In *Precarious Life*, Butler states “[t]hat we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are subject to death at the whim of another, are all reasons for both fear and grief” (xii). Each of the characters in *An Oak Tree* demonstrate “fear and grief”, following the tragedy which sharply reminds them of their vulnerability to injury and “death at the whim of another”. The Hypnotist explains that, since the accident, he has lost his chutzpah and charm: “I’ve lost my mojo!” (94). The Father explains how the accident has caused his wife distress: “Dawn – she’s very unhappy” (86) and discloses his own unhappiness: “I’ve thought about suicide” (95).

It is evident that, as Butler describes, the experience of loss creates a shared vulnerability amongst the characters: “[l]oss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (*Precarious Life* 20). She indicates that such a loss is, indeed, transformative “[t]here is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be chartered or planned” (*Precarious Life* 21). The unpredictable nature of the effect of loss causes confusion for the Father who asks the Hypnotist, “I don’t know what to do. / Will you help me?” (88); he is daunted by his personal reaction to grief he did not plan for. In *An Oak Tree*, because of this grief, the characters undergo and affect transformations, just as the second actor – through his own vulnerable precarity – transforms into the Father.

The precarity that the car accident unleashes is not only manifested as transformative distress for the characters, but also in the way they mentally engage with the world. For example, since the accident, the Hypnotist has been unable to work as a Hypnotist: “[s]ince your daughter’s death, I’ve not – I’m not. I’ve not been much of a hypnotist” (85). He suggests that, since the accident, he has lost his capacity to operate in this way: “[f]or the last three months, since the accident, I’ve been – I’ve lost all ability” (94). This impasse chimes with the transformative impact of loss that Butler describes. She notes that following loss “[o]ne finds oneself fallen. One is exhausted but does not know why. Something is larger than one’s own deliberate plan, one’s own project, one’s own knowing and choosing” (*Precarious Life* 21). The hypnotist’s loss of “ability” to hypnotise people suggests that the trauma has destroyed his imaginative ability. Perhaps, because the hypnotist was the cause and witness of Claire’s death, he is unable to work with artistic symbols and suggestion any more: the material reality of life and death has overwhelmed everything else. In ‘Notes on An Oak

Tree', Crouch explains he hopes to find depth "in considering the hypnotist as artist who, as a consequence of what happens, loses his ability to create" (Crouch in Rebellato 232).⁴⁴

Alternatively, the existential precarity caused by the impact of the car accident appears to have encouraged the Father to behave as though hypnotised – to see reality in an alternative way by 'transforming' an oak tree into his daughter: "I've changed it into Claire" (101). Crouch notes that he hopes "to consider the father as 'artist' who, as a consequence of what happens, has no choice BUT to create" (Crouch in Rebellato 232). The Father can now artistically transform one thing into another thing, whereas the Hypnotist has lost his creative ability to make these suggestive transformations in his shows. The exchange of creative ability that takes place between the two men highlights a belief that there is not one reflexive way for humans to respond to precarity, but that there is always likely to be a conceptual shift of engagement with the world. Crouch explains the Father's decision to turn Claire into an oak tree is a symptom of the significant impact of his grief, as Bottoms describes: "Crouch states that 'in my head I equate the loss of Claire with the effect that World War I had on art – the idea of monumental loss making it no longer possible to trust the old, figurative ways of seeing'" ('Authorizing...' 69). Crouch indicates that in writing *An Oak Tree* he attempted to explore how huge loss often triggers artistic and philosophical shifts:

Conceptual art was triggered by the losses of the beginning of the Twentieth Century: the Great War, the death of grand narratives, the loss of faith in previous representations. It was these losses that enabled Marcel Duchamp to put a urinal in a gallery. In Freud's *On Melancholy and Mourning* he talks about the impulse to create art stemming from a sense of grief, a sense of loss [...] With *An Oak Tree*, I wanted to connect these ideas: that art can be triggered by a de-materiality, that loss can be the engine of art, that something which isn't there can be created through an act of intention. (Crouch in Svich 209)

Crucially, what Crouch describes here is that the experience of loss – a hole, gap, space, diminution – allows room for "something which isn't there" to be "created" and placed into the space produced by the destruction. For Crouch, loss creates an opportunity for artistic and philosophical replacement and substitution.

Precarity is central to the structural and performative form of *An Oak Tree*, and the affect of witnessing this precarity allows an audience an embodied understanding of the narrative. In *An Oak Tree*, the second actor is obviously a precarious figure on the stage. Crouch explains that this precarity is the most "real" part of the play: "[o]f course, *An Oak*

⁴⁴ At the back of Dan Rebellato's *Modern British Playwriting 2000-2009* there are 'Notes on An Oak Tree' which is a "document written [by Crouch] for Karl James, Andy Smith and Chris Dorley-Brown prior to a workshop in September 2004" (230).

Tree really is unrehearsed for the second actor: ‘as real as one can be in the theatre,’ Crouch asserts, ‘*An Oak Tree* is real’” (Bottoms ‘Authorizing...’, 71). What it appears Crouch means by this is that by stripping away any rehearsal time or preconceptions, the second actor is able to respond live and instinctively in the moment, fully present to the demands of the experience. It is precisely the precarity of the second actor that allows them to achieve with Crouch a more authentic level of ‘presence as a shared time and place’ that has not been pre-prepared. Rebellato recognises that the device of the second actor stages precarity that is already inherent in theatre:

The precariousness of the device fills *An Oak Tree* with vulnerability and tenderness. The theatre’s provisionality and precarity, its liveness and risk are sharpened and deepened by the second actor, giving new intensity to the dreadful delicacy of the Father’s grief and the Hypnotist’s regret. (8)

Rebellato suggests that all that is precarious about the theatre is “sharpened and deepened” by watching the second actor navigate through the play. The power of witnessing their “vulnerability” is not simply a trick of form, but it works to aid an understanding of the narrative, offering a “new intensity” to the trauma the characters experience. The precarity of the second actor reflects, enhances and embodies the precarity of the Father, and the Hypnotist. An audience shares the space with the second actor (presence as proximity) and the live “risk” of their endeavor increases the audience’s embodied understanding of the potential for responding to precarity with imaginative transubstantiation. This transference of precarious feelings from the stage to the audience is why I contend that this play can be understood as one in which the real is extradiegetic, as I outlined in Chapter One, because it offers an embodied interrogation of the precarity of the real.

Rebellato makes the case that the precarious predicament of the second actor works to remind the audience of their own transubstantative power and responsibility:

It also intensifies our sense of ourselves as an audience, gives us a peculiarly intense sense that we’re all, actors and spectators, in the room together making this all happen. It gives us a fleeting sense of our very connectedness as people, and allows us to glimpse that our mutual responsibilities, our overlapping imaginative landscapes, our care for one another are precious things that don’t just happen, that – like fairies in Peter Pan, like words, like theatre – our humanity only exists if we believe in it. (‘Introduction’ 8)

The language that Rebellato uses here to refer to the precarity of the second actor is recognisably the language of precarity as defined by Judith Butler. Rebellato suggests that the

second actor draws attention to presence as proximity – that we’re “in the room together making this all happen”, and the shared presence intensifies our mutual precarity. The “mutual responsibilities” and “our care for one another” recall Butler’s consideration of the responsibility placed on us: “the demand that comes from elsewhere, sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us” (*Precarious Life* 130). For Butler, a recognition of our humanity, of our reality, is only possible when a demand of responsibility is addressed to us: “in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails” (*Precarious Life* 130). For the second actor, the demand and responsibility that Crouch and the audience place upon them to affect a transformation into the Father is the moment of address that constitutes their existence. I disagree with Butler that “our existence proves precarious” only in the failure of such an address. This does not correlate with Levinas’ philosophy, on which her ideas draw. The act of the address itself is exposing and creates precarity, as Levinas highlights: “[t]o expose myself to the vulnerability of the face its to put my ontological right to existence in question” (Levinas in Butler *Precarious Life* 132). As soon as a demand is placed by another (exposure to the face), the subject becomes precarious. Levinas describes the “face as the extreme precariousness of the other. Peace as awakening to the precariousness of the other” (Levinas 140). Butler is quick to point out that Levinas uses the word ‘as’ instead of ‘is’ “to avoid any commitment to the order of being” (*Precarious Life* 134). If we consider the precariousness of the Other as the face, Crouch’s second actor – in their precariousness – exists as the face. An audience’s response to this face (second actor) therefore, as Rebellato argues, encourages ethical responsibility. As Butler explains, to respond to the face means to become aware of precarity:

To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself. This cannot be an awakensness, to use his word, to my own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another’s precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other. This is what makes the face belong to the sphere of ethics. (*Precarious Life* 134)

For Butler, it is crucial that the understanding of the Other’s precarity is not born from an introspective self-understanding of our own precarity, but arises through understanding of the Other’s precariousness by meeting the vulnerability of the face. Therefore, in terms of *An Oak Tree*, the precariousness of the second actor is a way for the audience to be exposed to the face. In exposure to the face, the audience become aware of their own precarity (their own

“humanity” as Rebellato highlights), and their own responsibility for each other, for “peace”. Here, the “active” relationship (Butler in Puar 169) between existential and societal precarity is revealed again: the dependency shared between Crouch and performer (existential precarity) reminds the audience of a wider condition of precarity. The shared responsibility between performer and audience is what Crouch hopes his theatre will achieve – a level of democratization. As discussed, the audience’s active participation with the second actor is central to this experience – in Levinasian terms, they must respond to their precarity with ‘peace’: as Rebellato puts it, “our humanity only exists if we believe in it” (‘Introduction 8’). Belief, again, is central to the power of the moment here: belief in the precarious substitution of the second actor into the Father. Through this substitution by the second actor, precarity is performed. This substitution is only made possible through the archive (the script the second actor uses), presence (the live presence of the second actor), and technology (Crouch’s use of headphones to dictate to them). These three work together to indexically point towards the second actor’s ‘real-ness’, which highlights and performs precarity. In the following chapter I unravel how Noble uses approach through using an audience participant who he uses to expose the vulnerability of the Other.

3.14 Conclusion

In this chapter I analysed the conceptual theatre of Tim Crouch, focusing on his play *An Oak Tree* in order to show that his work can be considered ‘theatre of the real’, as coined by Carol Martin. I described how Crouch’s work emanates from conceptual art practices and showed that in *An Oak Tree* he uses the archive, presence and technology as indexical traces of the real. I illustrated how presence operates in *An Oak Tree* through its centrality to both the plot and form of the play. The storyline of the Father details how he creates ‘presence in absence’ through transubstantiating an oak tree into his daughter. Comparably, the form of using a second unrehearsed actor offers the audience an embodied understanding of this transubstantiation as they are required to perform the same act of faith in order to ‘see’ the character of the Father in the second actor.

I revealed how these transubstantiations provide Crouch with a way to articulate how precarity affects the experience of reality. For the characters in *An Oak Tree*, the traumatic impact of the death of Claire creates precarity through destabilising their understanding of reality. Again, comparably, the precarious and vulnerable situation of the second actor provides the audience with an embodied understanding of the precarity that the characters

experience. Both the characters and the audience make perceptual changes in the way they engage with the world. In this way, the content and form of *An Oak Tree* express how precarity alters the experience of the real.

CHAPTER FOUR

VOICING THE REAL: ALECKY BLYTHE'S *LITTLE REVOLUTION*

My dictaphone gave me license into other people's lives.

– Alecky Blythe ('Too True?' panel)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will analyse *Little Revolution* in both performance and text in order to show how Blythe uses the archive, presence and technology to signal what – for her – is the theatrical route to the real: the voice. For Blythe, the indexical traces of the real all coalesce in the voice, which is the core of her practice, and she uses these traces as a way to stage contemporary precarity. In her use of the recorded and repeated voice, Blythe reifies the voice and situates it as the key to understanding a person's subjective experience. Janelle Reinelt warns of the “promise of documentary theatre” in which the document is considered to provide “a realist epistemology” (*Get Real* 7). I will argue Blythe's work trades on the ‘promise of the voice’, codified in discourse as a site of the real.

This is not to claim that Blythe does not rigorously analyse the challenges and problems of her verbatim work. She often highlights and confronts the complications of verbatim practice, and in particular draws attention to how she constructs her scripts. Indeed, her productions sometimes begin with original recorded audio played through speakers, before segueing into actors repeating it through earphones. This highlights the constructed nature of the production, and her own position as interviewer, editor and author – a complicated position that this chapter interrogates. Further, she does not consider her work a form of journalism and is more concerned with creating a strong dramatic narrative and entertaining her audience.

This chapter will demonstrate how Blythe uses the indexical traces of the real through which to explore and stage precarity, in content and form. In focusing on the response of communities to traumatic and significant events, I contend that Blythe has developed, what I term, ‘post traumatic kitsch theatre’. This mode of theatre offers insight into what I consider to be an ‘English’ response to crises – a superficial communitarianism tinged by a nostalgic

and sentimental world-view. This reveals a common pattern across theatre of the real productions – an interest in staging the destabilisation of reality and identity (precarity), which leads to nostalgic attempts to ‘replace’ a perceived lost reality by substituting something into that gap. I will reveal how these substitutions are cruelly optimistic.

I begin by offering some historical background to verbatim theatre as context for my analysis, with a focus on how the voice has constellated in verbatim practice in order to show the political and aesthetic importance of vocal delivery to this discourse. This investigation will follow three lines of inquiry. Firstly, I consider the work of Derek Paget, perhaps the most significant figure in the scholarship of British verbatim theatre. Secondly, I introduce the recent research on voice undertaken by Kate Dorney, Maggie Inchley and Konstantinos Thomaidis in order to frame the contemporary field. Finally, I analyse the development of Blythe’s own work and her comments on the importance of the voice in her practice. In comparison to Paget’s 1987 article, I consider how Blythe’s work has – to some extent – been transposed from US culture, and compare the approach to verbatim across the different sides of the Atlantic. Through focusing on these three lines of enquiry, I will show how the voice has been centrally constructed, celebrated and politicised throughout documentary theatre history.

I then turn to *Little Revolution* and look separately at how the archive, presence and technology work as indexical traces of the real in performance. By separating this research into these sections it is important to note I am not separating them as elements (they all crucially coalesce to form a reality braid), but, for purposes of analysis, it is useful and offers more clarity to focus on each separately. This section involves both a close reading of Blythe’s text, and also performance analysis of the 2014 Almeida production. I will explain how Blythe’s work is a clear example of Martin’s theatre of the real and demonstrate how her plays explore the tension between the intradiegetic and extradiegetic real in contemporary theatre.

4.2 Alecky Blythe, verbatim theatre, and recorded delivery practice

In Chapter One, I detailed Carol Martin’s definition of theatre of the real, which she explains is “also known as documentary theatre as well as docudrama, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, and theatre of fact” (1).

Verbatim theatre – a strand of documentary theatre – is currently the most prevalent of these forms in England. Tom Cantrell notes that, in Britain, it is the “principal term currently used

to describe” plays that use “found material” (2). Blythe’s plays use found material (recordings of real people edited into a dramatic text) and therefore they can be easily classified within Martin’s theatre of the real taxonomy. Hammond and Steward offer a useful broad definition of verbatim theatre:

The term verbatim refers to the origins of the text spoken in the play. The words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or research process, or are appropriated from existing records such as the transcripts of an official enquiry. They are then edited, arranged or recontextualised to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the characters of the real individuals whose words are being used. (9)

Hammond and Steward make the distinction that verbatim “is not a form, it is a technique; it is a means rather than an end” (9).⁴⁵

The rise of verbatim theatre in Britain has been well documented. Cyrielle Garson claims it “has expanded exponentially since the mid-1990s” (PhD thesis 14); Hammond and Steward recognise what is new is “verbatim theatre’s recent rise to prominence and acceptance as a mainstream method in its own right” (11); and, in 2012, Michael Billington claimed verbatim “as both process and product, is not merely everywhere. It is has proved itself infinitely flexible” (“V” is for verbatim theatre’). Several scholars and reviewers attribute the rise in popularity of verbatim theatre to Alecky Blythe’s plays. The reviewer Mark Shenton claims “Alecky Blythe has been one [sic] verbatim theatre’s pioneering exponents” and, in his introduction to the transcript of an interview with Blythe, Chris Megson suggests that “[t]he extraordinary ascendancy of verbatim theatre-making in the UK over the past decade and a half is due in large part to Blythe’s innovation and influence” (‘What I’m Aspiring to Be...’ 220). The playwright Simon Stephens claims, “[f]ew playwrights can claim to have defined a theatrical form or process with quite the same conviction as Alecky Blythe” (‘S2 Ep3’).⁴⁶ These comments reveal the impact Blythe’s plays have had on the contemporary theatre landscape, but it should not be taken as read that she has sole responsibility for the revival of documentary theatre. The map of the field is complex and, whilst she features prominently, her technique comes from a tradition that existed prior to her adoption of it, as well as inspiring other theatre-makers herself.

⁴⁵ ‘Verbatim theatre’ is a complex term. This chapter uses ‘verbatim’ to mean a play that is completely constructed from found text. As Luckhurst writes, “in its purest sense” verbatim theatre is theatre in which “practitioners, if called to account, could provide interviewed sources for its dialogue” (201).

⁴⁶ It is, of course, hyperbolic and inaccurate to claim that Blythe “defined” recorded delivery, or verbatim form, but this is a narrative that appears to have cemented. Certainly, she gave the form more prominence, but several other practitioners use it, including Anna Deavere Smith who is credited with its creation, the Australian writer and director Roslyn Oades, and the director Kristine Landon-Smith.

In 2003 Blythe founded the Recorded Delivery company following the “unexpected success” of her first play *Come Out Eli* performed at the Arcola Theatre (Hammond and Steward 78).⁴⁷ Blythe uses the recorded delivery technique to create her plays and her company is acknowledged to have introduced the practice of this distinctive form of verbatim theatre into the UK: “she has been credited with bringing a new and unusual performance practice to the stage” (Cantrell 7). On the Recorded Delivery company’s website, there is an explanation of this technique:

The technique involves recording interviews from real life and editing them into a desired structure. The edited recordings are played live to the actors through earphones during the rehearsal process, and on stage in performance. The actors listen to the audio and repeat what they hear. They copy not just the words but exactly the way in which they were first spoken. Every cough, stutter and hesitation is reproduced. The actors do not learn the lines at any point. By listening to the audio during performances the actors remain accurate to the original recordings, rather than slipping into their own patterns of speech. (Recorded Delivery)⁴⁸

In her research and interview process, Blythe does not begin with a plan, or a list of set questions and instead prefers “to be open to wherever it may lead” (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 84). This is a similar approach to Kim Noble, as the following chapter highlights. Blythe’s initial idea for *Come Out Eli* was “to interview people about their fears”. Blythe states that “very conveniently” an event took place close to her home to enable her to explore this theme: a gunman held a hostage for fifteen days (*Cruising* 3; Blythe in Stephens). Choosing a theme and then following interesting hunches is the advice she followed from the director Mark Wing-Davey, who introduced her to the technique: “[y]ou take a subject matter

⁴⁷ Other productions from the Recorded Delivery company include *Strawberry Fields* (2005); *All The Right People Come Here* (2005); *I Only Came Here For 6 Months* (2006); *Cruising* (2006); *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008); *Do We Look Like Refugees?!* (2010); *Little Revolution* (2014), and, most famously, the verbatim musical *London Road* (2011). Plays by Blythe in collaboration with other companies and theatres include *A Man in a Box* (2007) for the National Theatre Studio and subsequently Channel 4; *Voices From The Mosque* as part of Headlong’s *Decade* (St Katharine Docks, 2011), *Where Have I Been All My Life* for Newcastle’s New Vic Theatre (2012), and *Friday Night Sex* for the Royal Court’s ‘Open Court’, with the writer Michael Wynne.

⁴⁸ Blythe uses the term ‘recorded delivery’ to describe her particular technique, although the use of earphones in verbatim theatre is labeled differently by other scholars, such as Cantrell who notes that “verbatim headphone theatre” has become a major area of development in Australian documentary theatre (9). I prefer to use the term recorded delivery, not only because it is the term Blythe uses to describe her work, but also because ‘headphones’ imply a particular technological device that features a band across the head, joining earphones together. In *Little Revolution*, actors wore earphones, which are less visible than headphones. Other verbatim practitioners have chosen to use more prominent headphones in their work, and describe it as “headphone verbatim”, such as Kristine Landon-Smith’s *I Walk In Your Words* (2017-18). Further, Blythe’s work is aesthetically very different to other headphone theatre. For example, in some headphone theatre, the audience are asked to wear the headphones and become the protagonist, or key listener, in the work, as in the case of nonzeroone’s *would like to meet* (2010), Rotozaza’s *Romcom* (2003), and Glen Neath and David Rosenberg’s *Ring* (2013), and *Fiction* (2015).

[...] Be open as to where the subject might go – that subject is just your starting point” (Blythe in Stephens). Indeed, Blythe never intended to develop a career as a playwright and initially started making verbatim work because of the frustration of being a jobbing actor: “I wish I could lay claim to worthier intentions than simply getting a part in *The Bill*” (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 79).⁴⁹ She considers that the desire to create interesting roles for herself, “work that excites me”, has led her to end up “in a much more interesting place, thanks to verbatim, more by luck than design” (Blythe in Megson 221).

Blythe’s work has generated responses from contemporary theatre scholars, however it is notable that there are no major critical accounts of Blythe’s work: a Methuen collection of her major plays is yet to be published. Cantrell highlights this when referring to the work of Christopher Innes in the *Modern Drama* journal as “one of the very few studies to refer to Blythe” (*Acting in Documentary Theatre* 139).⁵⁰ It is worth introducing some of the “few studies” that respond to Blythe’s work in order to highlight the key critical approaches that my work sits alongside.

Within the theatre-reviewing community Blythe has been credited with championing documentary theatre and introducing a different strand of verbatim to British theatre. Critic Susannah Clapp highlights the importance of Blythe’s work to shaping the first theatrical decade of the twenty-first century:

Alecky Blythe’s work is a gold thread running through the theatre of the past decade. With *Come Out Eli*, her record of the 2002 Hackney siege, she began to change the way audiences listen. With *The Girlfriend Experience* she took us into the deep throats of working girls. In *London Road* she put herself at the forefront of a new musical wave.

In terms of scholarly output on Blythe, Cantrell’s work draws attention to the challenges of documentary theatre practice from an actor’s perspective. In *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (2013) Cantrell focuses on the particular practical and ethical challenges faced by actors in documentary theatre. Cantrell uses Blythe’s eighth play, *The Girlfriend Experience*, as a case study and analyses the actors’ process in this production following interviews with Blythe, Joe Hill-Gibbons, and members of the original cast. What is particularly useful in Cantrell’s study is his questioning of whether the recorded delivery technique limits actors’

⁴⁹ Blythe originally acted in her initial productions, including *Come Out Eli* (2003), though in this she took on roles of other people and Miranda Hart played Blythe. To my knowledge, *Little Revolution* was the first time she played herself.

⁵⁰ In fact, Christopher Innes’ article only obliquely refers to Blythe in one paragraph and the article focuses on writers of “the theatrical establishment” (435) – David Hare, Tom Stoppard, Max Stafford-Clark and Robin Soans – in order to argue for “a recent turn (or return) to documentary theatre in recent British drama” (435).

interpretative ability, or whether, as he argues, “the picture is more complicated than this” (140). Lib Taylor and Cyrielle Garson have also considered Blythe’s use of earphones in her work, though not from the perspective of the actor’s process. Garson has written several insightful articles focusing on verbatim theatre that make reference to Blythe and highlight the use of earphones as a “distinctly twenty-first century contribution” to theatre (‘Remixing...’ 50). For Blythe, the use of earphones is crucial to the way she makes plays: she has often spoken openly and in detail about her work both on panels, and in introductions to printed play texts. In interviews and her written work, the most prominent of her reflections on her practice concerns the central importance of voice to recorded delivery in exactly reproducing recorded speech:

every ‘um’, ‘er’, stutter and non-sequitur [is] lovingly preserved, because it is these that reveal the person’s thought processes [...] and it is this detail that gives the character such startling verisimilitude. (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 97)

When discussing the voice, Blythe often uses the word “real” to describe what she hopes the technique achieves: “I do not deny that actors are highly skilled at interpreting their lines, but the way the real person said them will always be more interesting” (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 81). For Blythe, real speech offers a bountiful foundation for dramatic dialogue: “how could I ever hope to write anything that comes close to the fantastically rich and multi-layered messiness of real speech?” (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 102). She often suggests that the technique provides her work with an unparalleled authenticity: “[n]othing in this play is written or made up” (‘Interview with Alecky Blythe’, *Little Revolution* 5) and Lib Taylor notes that, for Blythe, placing value on the voice is a route to the real: “for Blythe, matching an original produces a truth” (‘Voice, Body...’ 369). Because of the importance Blythe places on the voice, in the next section I will focus on how it has constellated in documentary practice.

4.3 “Hearing real stuff”: voice in documentary theatre

The history of documentary practice from which Blythe’s work derives is large, and still expanding. Indeed, as Cantrell highlights, there exists an extensive discussion as to what actually constitutes ‘verbatim’ theatre, which accounts for his use of the term ‘documentary’ in his own research (*Acting in Documentary Theatre* 2-3). Cantrell explains that the

playwright Rony Robinson's comments on verbatim in Derek Paget's 1987 article have led to a debate

on the question as to whether Robinson's description of verbatim theatre as 'predicated upon...taping' should be taken to mean 'exclusively based on taping', or if, in fact, the definition should encompass productions which are merely based on recorded interviews. (*Acting in Documentary Theatre* 3)

'Verbatim' often encompasses documentary theatre in a wider sense and manifold versions of verbatim theatre now exist. From the staging at Manchester's Royal Exchange of Simon Armitage's BBC Radio 4's poetic radio drama *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster* (Royal Exchange, 2012); to *JOHN* (National Theatre, 2014), a "verbatim dance-theatre work" (DV8 website); to Robin Soans' play *Crouch, Touch, Pause, Engage* (2015) based on interviews, to *Committee...* a musical taken from government transcripts (Donmar Warehouse, 2017), there exists a wide range of theatre that attaches itself to the descriptor 'verbatim'.⁵¹ This small selection of productions demonstrates the diverse nature of the productions that are marketed as 'verbatim' and the impossibility of providing a succinct overview of the field. Instead, I want to consider more closely what vocal delivery politically and aesthetically means in this discourse, using a few key examples. This will offer a useful foundation from which to analyse Blythe's reification of the voice.

In 1987, Derek Paget wrote an article in *New Theatre Quarterly*, which has since been used as a touchstone through which to frame the field. In this, he draws from interviews with English documentary theatre practitioners to uncover the thinking behind their methods, politics and dramatic intentions. He also documents the legacy of this mode of work: "the wide impact from the late 1950s onwards of the European epic and the political tradition of Brecht and Piscator" (318-319). Through mapping the field of verbatim theatre in the UK, Paget explores how it links to past traditions and cites the British theatre director Peter Cheeseman's work at the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent in the 1960s as plays that "could claim to have been first in the field" of verbatim practice (318).

Indeed, Cheeseman's influence was considered to have sparked a renaissance in documentary theatre:

The influence which Cheeseman's documentary approach to theatre has had on the regional theatre in Great Britain has been considerable. Since 1964 and the production

⁵¹ The full title of this Donmar Warehouse show is *The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee Takes Oral Evidence on Whitehall's Relationship with Kids Company*.

of The Jolly Potters, nearly every major regional repertory company has experimented with a musical documentary form oriented towards the local community. (Elvgren 97)

Cheeseman's documentary productions took a purist approach, with a dedicated reliance on accuracy to the gathered source material: "Cheeseman's foremost requisite for documentary theatre is that it maintain objectivity" (Elvgren 90), although he was "strongly opposed to documentary theatre as political or social propaganda" (Elvgren 91). Source material was gathered from primary sources "such as newspaper archives, biographies, diaries, letters and the like", and tape recordings of interviews were also used (Elvgren 93). Cheeseman's work was invested in an attempt to reflect a community back on itself, and he created shows based on the potteries industry, Staffordshire history and the railway system (Elvgren 90). He likened documentary plays to something close to journalism: "[t]he sensation of watching a documentary is the sensation of watching a fact. You can't write a documentary – it's a contradiction in terms. You can only edit documentary material" (Cheeseman in Elvgren 92).

Paget also offers some of the most cited definitions for verbatim theatre. The article is acknowledged to have instantiated the term 'verbatim' in theatrical discourse as a way to distinguish between theatre based on documents, and theatre created precisely by using the words of recordings: "[v]erbatim theatre, which makes fascinating use of taped actuality recording as its primary source material, is the latest manifestation of documentary theatre" (317).⁵² Paget describes how "the firmest of commitments is [...] made by the company to the use of vernacular speech, recorded as the primary source material of their play" (317). According to Paget, there are a number of benefits to this way of working – actors are released from "some of the dimensions of playwriting within the naturalistic mode" and it offers an "ensemble method of working" if actors are involved with the research and interviewing process. Paget states that the genre has "been facilitated by the portable cassette recorder" (318), claiming "tape-recorded interviews" are "the hallmark of the verbatim play"

⁵² Cyrielle Garson's PhD thesis suggests the widely-held belief that this article was the first to use the term may be erroneous. She comments that "it might be the case that earlier mentions of the term have appeared in print" and says she discovered use of the term "in Ian Herbert's *London Theatre Record*" with the exact reference found on "page 287 in Vol. 7 [...] made in reference to Joyce Holliday's play *It's a bit Lively Outside* (Crucible, Sheffield)" (17). Cantrell also highlights that "the actual definition in Paget's article was offered by Rony Robinson, in relation to a particular set of working processes", although he appears to offer Paget's summary of Robinson's words as an actual quotation from Robinson himself (*Acting in Documentary Theatre* 2-3). This is, as far as I can tell, a misattribution, but it is indeed the case that, further on in Paget's article, Robinson is quoted as saying "[t]he collective method of doing verbatim shows seems to remove the difference between performers, directors, sometimes designers if they've been in on it from the beginning" (Robinson in Paget 318). The use of Robinson's term "verbatim shows" to describe theatre made from words spoken by actual people attests to Garson's claim the term had been circulating prior to Paget's article. It is the case, however, that Paget's article brought the term 'verbatim' to the fore and raised the prominence of the term within theatrical discourse.

(322). Through drawing parallels with the use of technology in the field of oral history, Paget suggests that the task of verbatim theatre is comparable to a type of journalism:

The projects of both the Oral History and the Verbatim Theatre movements are to some extent predicated upon the technology of the tape recorder, and both are operating in and seeking to extend the space left by the ‘official’ recording and reporting media. (326)

The view that verbatim theatre fills a gap left by mainstream journalism is one that has lasted. For example, Luckhurst argues that it “is precisely because the media industries are no longer trusted to put forward dissenting or minority views that verbatim plays thrive” (‘Verbatim Theatre, Media Relations and Ethics’ 217). Paget especially draws focus to the unique speech found in verbatim texts:

Writers must recognize that, however good their ear for ordinary speech, it is unlikely that they would ever be able to introduce into a conventional play the variety of speech patterns and rhythms emanating from the verbatim technique. (330)

Paget quotes the writer and director Chrys Salt who describes speech recorded for verbatim productions as “real”:

Real talk is not the same texture as the language of the dramatist. The language of the dramatist is actually highly stylized. When you listen to real talk you hear these extraordinary juxtapositions, loops, little circumlocutions. (Salt in Paget 330)

Placing the word “real” alongside “talk” in opposition to words created by playwrights immediately elevates the authenticity of a verbatim theatre production. The ramification of tying “real” to the source material for verbatim plays heightens the expectation that what is performed on stage will be an exact replica of life found outside the theatre. As Megson writes, there are “probing philosophical questions to be raised about the extent to which theater can reasonably aspire to the condition of pure, unmediated communication with an audience” (‘David Hare’ 513). Whether or not such an unblemished representation of lived experience can be delivered, it is certainly the case that other scholars highlight the difference of verbatim speech, compared to text invented by a playwright. In response to Blythe’s play *Little Revolution*, Susannah Clapp comments:

You – at any rate I – realise for the first time just how stylised ‘realistic’ stage dialogue is, how effectively a confident delivery can disguise incoherence, how a rich vocabulary can triumph over broken syntax, how much meaning of a speech is carried or

contradicted by pausing, gesture, fleeting facial expression or a blank stare. ('Little Revolution review')

This opinion correlates with the value that Paget and Salt place on the powerful ability of recorded speech to convey emotion and experience more profoundly than anything invented.

Dan Rebellato corroborates Clapp's view:

On the one hand I have that startled intense response of hearing how people actually speak placed on a stage, which jolts you into realising how artificial realistic speech usually is (which is Susannah Clapp's point, above), and does immerse you somehow in a particular, ungeneralised situation... ('Kant, Complexity...')

Rebellato's consideration that the specificity of actual speech "immerse[s] you" in specific situations attests to Paget's belief in the "genuine deictical power" of regional idioms (330). Paget claims the muscularity of such speech creates a musicality to the rhythmic texture of the script, which is "a significant challenge" for actors to play: "[w]hereas 'ordinary' speech requires the actor to learn, interpret and 'play' them through his/her vocal and physical skills, here it is a case, indeed, of 'the actor as instrument'" (331-332). Paget seems to make a distinction between "ordinary" speech invented by writers, and the "idiosyncratic rhythms" of verbatim, suggesting that, for actors, verbatim is a more vocally demanding form. He also highlights the different approach of an audience to verbatim drama, quoting Rony Robinson:

In our earlier shows, we had painted onto the set, the backdrop: 'Everything spoken in this play was spoken by people in...whatever.' So the audience knew they were hearing real stuff. (Robinson in Paget 317)

Quite what the value of "hearing real stuff" actually is, as opposed to other types of theatre (presumably 'unreal stuff') is a question that verbatim theatre scholars have continually grappled with. It is clear that, for Paget, the word-for-word repetition of regional voices is privileged, and Blythe's work also privileges unique dialects and voices.

4.4 "Every cough, stutter and hesitation is reproduced": voice in the recorded delivery practice

When writing in 1987, Paget suggests that, as opposed to perfect vocal imitation, "[t]ranscripts are normally sufficient" for actors in verbatim theatre because much of the text has been "collaged", and any anomalies "can be resolved immediately" by the actor who took the interview and, more to the point, "impersonation is very far from the aims of Verbatim Theatre" (332). The actor Gary Yershon (who performed in Rony Robinson's *Cheshire*

Voices, 1977) corroborates this view, stating that “I suppose impersonation, or just parroting, is not part of the process, really. You have to make the rhythm your own, while at the same time preserving its integrity” (Yershon in Paget 332).

Blythe’s approach is very different. First, she is the only company member who undertakes research and interviews, and actors are cast after the script has been written, while Paget demonstrates that the creation of a verbatim show in 1980s Britain tended to be more ensemble-based as the actors took part in the interview process. Second, exact impersonation and identical parroting are key to the recorded delivery approach. This presents a unique challenge for actors as they never see a script, and only hear the play in rehearsal and performance via a pair of earphones. As such, there is no demand for them to learn the text and, for Blythe, the absence of a text during the rehearsal and performance process adds to the success of the production.⁵³ She considers that there is an “unique level of spontaneity that unlearned delivery demands” and they are “forced to actively listen to their lines”.⁵⁴ Blythe claims this produces performances that are “unselfconscious and incredibly free”; “over-familiarity with the material” is removed so that psychological self-reflection takes favour over rote repetition (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 81). This approach is similar to Crouch’s intention for the second actor to respond instinctively to the unfamiliar text, as the last chapter demonstrated.

Although Blythe is a particular trailblazer of the recorded delivery technique, it is not new to verbatim practice. She first discovered this way of making verbatim theatre attending a workshop at the Actors’ Centre called ‘Drama Without Paper’, run by the actor and director Mark Wing-Davey, then Artistic Director of the Actors’ Centre. The workshop explored a technique developed by the American writer and performer Anna Deavere Smith and Wing-Davey’s connection to this technique stems from his creative collaboration with her.⁵⁵

⁵³ Interestingly, the lack of script affects academic study of Blythe’s work. In the archive for *Little Revolution*, the section labeled ‘script’ merely contains a slim document with ‘Track Titles’ and ‘Track Lengths’. In interview with Simon Stephens, Blythe notes that she does not even type out the printed version of the script to which I refer, although she does check it and make small edits: “a lovely person from Nick Hern Books has the arduous job of transcribing it all”. The script of *Little Revolution* that I analyse in this chapter is therefore a secondary text, an interpretation of an original audio text. When discussing how to transcribe verbatim interviews, Chris Goode suggests there is an ethical choice to be made considering what punctuation to use, but in Blythe’s case this choice is left to a Nick Hern Books employee (‘Making Verbatim Theatre’ panel).

⁵⁴ Whilst Blythe insists that this technique circumvents an actor’s interpretative instincts, Cantrell’s research on *The Girlfriend Experience* has demonstrated that, even following the strict rules of the recorded delivery technique, actors do bring their own cadences and interpretation to the vocal delivery.

⁵⁵ Scholars have confusedly connected Wing-Davey to Deavere Smith in a variety of ways, so it is unclear exactly how he came to work with her. Cantrell claims that he “directed and developed Smith’s 1997 solo play, *House Arrest: A Search for American character In and Around the White House*” (140), Megson that “he directed *House Arrest*, her piece from 1997” (221), Taylor that he directed a “four-week workshop” for *House Arrest* (370), and Rebellato that he attended a workshop “on her technique in New York” (*Modern British*

Deavere Smith creates solo shows by interviewing multiple people to create a script. Her rehearsal process involves listening closely to the recordings through earphones and mirroring the exact speech and gestures of the original contributors. Deavere Smith performs her shows solo, playing multiple characters – i.e., the people she has previously interviewed. She is enthralled by the power of language, which she terms “[m]y major fascination in the world” (‘The Word Becomes You’ 55). For her, listening to a person’s voice and observing their physicality when speaking offer a form of knowledge: “I can learn to know who somebody is, not from what they tell me, but from how they tell me” (51). It is not the content of a person’s speech that informs Deavere Smith’s acting process, but the linguistic rhythm and vocal cadences of that person – the sounds they emit when talking: their voice.

Blythe is drawn to the recorded delivery technique because of the value she places on the power of everyday speech to convey information. As Taylor notes, Blythe often suggests that voice recordings provide her work with an unparalleled authenticity:

Blythe sees authenticity as the foundation for her work. For her, authenticity derives from the exact reproduction of recorded sound (and not just language) that is channeled and embodied from documentary source material through the actors to the audience. (‘Voice, Body & Transmission’ 369)

On the Recorded Delivery website, Blythe highlights her indebtedness to Deavere Smith’s work:

Alecky Blythe has pioneered the innovative verbatim technique, originally created by Anna Deavere Smith. Deavere Smith was the first to combine the journalistic technique of interviewing her subjects with the art of interpreting their words through performance.

She cites Deavere Smith’s practice, stating that “by copying their speech-patterns with such precision, the real person behind the performance shone through” (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 80). However, there is a major difference in approach between the two practitioners: Deavere Smith only uses the earphone recordings in rehearsal, and removes them during performances. For Blythe, an exact vocal match by an actor to the original recording through the use of earphones in performance is key to her process: “for Blythe, matching an original produces a truth” (Taylor 369) and she claims the idiosyncratic sound of everyday speech

Playwriting 46), to name but a few varying narratives that describe their connection. Blythe suggests that he directed her ensemble piece *Fires in the Mirror* (Blythe in Stephens), but elsewhere claims “Mark learnt the technique from Anna Deavere Smith, whose first ensemble show, *House Arrest*, he had directed in 1998” (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 80).

offers a direct route to capturing and understanding a person's character.⁵⁶ Blythe argues that, when using this approach, "the actor responds to the sound of the voice and from that he or she 'finds' the character" (Blythe in Forsyth 119). It is clear that, for Blythe, a person's individual voice contains a venerable quality that is essential to the recorded delivery acting process.

4.5 Contemporary research on voice

Several scholars have explored the power of the voice in contemporary theatre as a way to capture a person's subjective experience; given the importance Blythe places on the voice, it is necessary to provide an overview of key ideas within the field that my work sits alongside. Although the field is growing, a study of the voice has not featured prominently in theatrical discourse. Konstantinos Thomaidis cites a "lack of sustained interactions between voice theory and writing on theatre" (*Theatre and Voice* 11) and Maggie Inchley considers that "the voice is a complex, interdisciplinary critical tool, yet has rarely been placed at the centre of scholarly practice in the study of drama and performance" (1).⁵⁷ Whilst 'language', 'speech' and 'voice' are all closely interrelated terms, it is important to highlight the different distinctions between them in order to establish definitions for the analysis that follows. Inchley offers a clear definition of what can be understood as constituting 'voice':

It is both physiological, creating sound through the manipulation and exhalation of air through the vocal apparatus, and metaphorical, allowing the human person to extend beyond itself or be invoked as a symbolic presence – a 'voice' in political and cultural discourses. (1)

Inchley defines how voice is connected to speech and language:

In terms of speech, the voice carries both sound and meaning, materially constituting the language that Raymond Williams formulates as 'an indissoluble element of human self-creation'. (1)

Language is understood to broadly mean a system of communication, usually human communication that is both written and spoken. Kate Dorney appears to conflate 'speech' and 'language' when describing the problems of finding a way to articulate this:

⁵⁶ In using 'character' here, I refer to the qualities distinctive to an individual's identity and subjective experience, not the way 'character' is understood in relation to theatre (the depiction of a person in a play).

⁵⁷ Thomaidis draws attention to writing by Aristotle, Augustine, Adorno, and Derrida, and more contemporary scholars who "have taken to voice as the main focus of their texts". He claims "the theatre community has ignored these significant contributions" (12).

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of dramatic speech is finding a satisfactory set of terms in which to describe it. I'm seeking to engage with the forms of dramatic language that are closest to 'ordinary', everyday language, to the kind of language one might hear on the bus, or in the supermarket, rather than rhetoric, or well-made prose. (7)

Dorney coins the term "lifelike-ese" to describe this language, "reflecting the fact that such language mimics the structures which underlie 'naturally occurring conversation', such as hesitation, not speaking in full 'sentences' and engaging in conversational repair" (8).

Thomaidis offers a further helpful distinction between related terms when he highlights that in theatrical discourse voice is often equated with 'speech' in terms of 'speaking a text', and calls for a disentanglement "of the vocal from the textual":

The type of thinking that sees voice in performance as primarily bound to some form of text – from elaborate metric writing and translations to documentary sources and devised material – is so pervasive that it might at first appear that voicing and speaking are synonymous in the case of performance. (13)

Thomaidis' exploration into voice in *Theatre and Voice* argues for a renegotiation of voice and asks that we "rethink voice not as a given or fixed but as the plural, in-between, challenging and generative practice of *voicing*" (74). His analysis of the recorded voice is particularly pertinent in relation to Blythe in that he believes the act of listening to recorded voices "produces the 'bodies' with which we become aurally connected" (68). For Thomaidis, the commitment of the listener delineates how voices are regarded: "the act of listening to the recorded voice, be it fixed or modifiable, recruits the body of the listener towards wider aesthetic and political collectivities" (70).

Maggie Inchley's focus is the connection between voice in new writing culture and New Labour politics and she points out that, even though new writing theatres diversified the 'voices' staged during that time, this was often a 'tick box exercise' for them rather than a genuine desire to empathise with the marginalised. In this way, as Lucy Tyler writes, "Inchley's work is an important one, not least because it reappraises [...] playwrights' voices outside the rhetoric of the new writing culture" (101). Inchley also draws attention to the productivity of the voice in identity creation, stating that "[t]hrough our voices we thus articulate our identities, express ourselves creatively, and establish a degree of personal and political agency" (1).

Inchley's book analyses the value placed on the voice and she challenges the "common claim of documentary and verbatim theatre practitioners that these forms offer opportunities for the 'voicing' of the experience of otherwise silenced or marginalised groups" (129). She uses Blythe's retention of the "exact speech rhythms of her subjects" as an example of the presumption "that the 'truth' and 'authenticity' of 'lost voices' are somehow carried in the reproduction of their exact words and sounds" and notes that, in scholarship from around 2006, "suspicions grew regarding the acts of editing, structuring and splicing that qualify these forms of theatre's claims to be a wholly transparent medium" (130). However, Inchley also acknowledges that Blythe is aware of the "negotiation between entertainment and truth that occurs as a crucial part of [her] practice" (130). Inchley raises an important point about the elision of the editorial work of verbatim playwrights, that often goes unremarked.

In order to explore how the voice is aesthetically and politically mobilised by Blythe, the main body of this chapter examines *Little Revolution*, while drawing comparison with some of her other work. Following an introduction of the play, the rest of the chapter is split into three key sections – 'Technology', 'Presence', and 'Archive' – and, throughout each, 'voice' is highlighted as the reality thread that braids the three.

4.6 *Little Revolution*

The first preview of *Little Revolution* took place on 26 August 2014 at the Almeida Theatre in Islington. *Little Revolution* is emblematic of the recorded delivery technique and the actors wore visible earpieces through which original audio was played in both rehearsal and performance. The narrative of the play concerns the 2011 riots in which thousands of people rioted across England triggered by the shooting of Mark Duggan, (a young black man), by police.

In Imogen Tyler's *Revolting Subjects* (2013), she focuses upon these 2011 riots, which she describes as "the largest and most pervasive scenes of civil unrest in recent British history" (179). Tyler explains how, following Duggan's murder, "a protest by his family and friends outside a Tottenham police station escalated into a riot" and across "the subsequent five nights several thousand young people joined in and the rioting, arson and looting spread across London and out to the business and shopping districts of several other English cities and towns" (179). The scale of the riots resulted in the death of five people, and by mid-October 2011 4,000 people had been arrested" (Tyler 180). Tyler's focus in her analysis of the riots is the "torrent of 'underclass' appellations" unleashed in the media coverage of the

riots, and this chapter will address some of her analysis in further detail, where appropriate in relation to *Little Revolution* (180).

There were several standout production features of *Little Revolution*, worth highlighting at this point. Firstly, the play was performed almost in the round, with the audience seated on all sides of the theatre, and lights on the audience remained lit for much of the performance. Secondly, alongside professional actors, the Almeida used a community chorus to play smaller parts, including the role of the young rioters. Thirdly, another key feature of the original production at the Almeida Theatre is that, like Crouch and Noble, Blythe featured as a cast member, playing herself.⁵⁸

The marketing by the Almeida Theatre was focused on voice. The trailer, released on YouTube, featured the recorded voices of Alecky and other real-life people, during the aftermath of the riots. Suspenseful music played underneath the voices, alongside background noise of street action and police sirens, suggesting the play might focus on the violence of the riots – the ‘truth’ of the actual stories from that time. On the screen, white writing on a black background reflected the words spoken (such as Alecky’s “Hackney...”), and also included short phrases to market the show: “[b]ringing the voices of one North London community from the streets to the stage”, “[t]he voices and stories of one North London community come alive in this explosive new play from Alecky Blythe”. On the Almeida Theatre’s website, publicity also focused on voice: “this explosive new play records the voices and stories of a community”. This suggests the play provides a “record”, an archive of what happened at the time, and how it affected the community. The repetition of the word ‘community’ in the marketing aligns with Tyler’s understanding of the riots as an event in which the media not only attacked the rioters, but also their communities: “visceral hatred was aimed not only at those who had participated in the rioting, but also at their families and the communities in which they lived. The term ‘scum’ was the favourite pejorative” (180 - 181). Blythe’s play certainly captures this, as I shall later discuss.

The printed play text further suggests the play captures an archival snapshot of the time. The first sentence on the back cover reads “[i]n the summer of 2011, London was burning. Alecky Blythe took her Dictaphone to the streets...” This sentence sets up a crisis (burning London), and “Alecky and her Dictaphone” as a responder – perhaps, even, a saviour: “[t]ook [...] to the streets” implies an act of protest, a recouping of the streets into Blythe’s possession and also aligns her with the rioters who also physically ‘took to the

⁵⁸ For the purposes of clarity in this chapter, when I refer to ‘Blythe’ I refer to Blythe as the author external to the play, and when I refer to ‘Alecky’ I refer to the character of Alecky within the text.

streets' in protest. However, Blythe also eschews her power within the printed interview at the start of the play text. In this, Blythe uses language that elides her creative contribution:

Nothing in this play is written or made up. All the words that the actors speak are words that I have collected with my Dictaphone. I do interviews with real-life people in real-life situations which I record... (5)

Blythe gives the impression that her unfettered access to the scene of the riots enabled her play access to the real – the repetition of 'real' stresses the play has an undeniable foundation in reality. Further, her use of the word "nothing" when discussing the methodological construction of the play implies that Blythe had no authorial input to the play. Certainly, Blythe has discussed her creative contribution in editing and deciding upon a narrative elsewhere, and later in the interview she highlights which narrative she decided to pursue ("that's the story I followed"), which is why it is surprising that this evasive declaration is the first sentence of the interview in the play text (7). Further, the term "collected" also indicates an unwillingness to claim creative control over the text. It portrays Blythe as what David Hare would term a "hunter-gatherer" figure, assembling words she has happened upon by chance (Paget 'Broken Tradition', 230).⁵⁹ By positioning herself at one remove from the creation of the text, yet also foregrounding where the material came from, Blythe highlights the complicated position of the author in verbatim theatre.

The position of Blythe as author was a feature of many of the reviews of *Little Revolution*, particularly because – for the first time – Blythe played herself. Rebellato notes how *Little Revolution* "divided the critics. And this isn't just a newspapers-versus-the-bloggers thing. It's got lots of people really worked up" ('Kant, Complexity...'). A central debate between critics, (noted by Rebellato, Haydon, and Trueman in their reviews) focused on whether the play was (or should be) an attempt to capture the essence of the riots, or whether it was a play that deconstructed the verbatim approach (see Rebellato's 'Kant, Complexity...' for his discussion of this). As Rebellato considers, "I wonder if *Little Revolution* is a show where, if you think it's about the riots, you won't like it; and if you think it's about how theatre can represent the riots, you'll love it" ('Kant, Complexity...').

Mark Shenton writes that Blythe's presence in the piece provided "a kind of meta-theatre demonstration of how the technique actually works". For Shenton, this was "overly self-referential" and "raises a suspicion that the show is more interested in form than content,

⁵⁹ In Paget's chapter in *Get Real* (Forsyth and Megson), he quotes Bella Merlin, who acted in David Hare's *The Permanent Way*: "Hare's term for Merlin and her fellow actors was 'hunter-gatherers' not researchers (qtd in Merlin p.125)". (230)

or at least context over story”. Shenton finds Blythe’s presence a distraction from the “bigger stories” that he feels were not adequately represented (*London Theatre* blog). Equally, Michael Billington argues there were voices missing from the piece:

I would like to have heard more young voices telling us about their privations and discontents. [...] Blythe could have created an even more telling piece exploring what, if anything, has changed since the riots. (*The Guardian*)

This criticism was also shared by Henry Hitchings who bemoans that

we see most of the characters too briefly, and it’s frustrating to hear little from the rioters. Instead the dominant voices are middle-class. The focus is in the wrong place, and despite consisting of authentic testimony it doesn’t feel bruisingly real. (*Evening Standard*)

It is noteworthy critics are quick to suggest what they believe the “focus” and the “real story” of the play should have been. This narrative posturing would not arise nearly so strongly in a work of complete fiction. Because the real events (the riots) have already happened, this encourages critics to assume certainty over what they think the most appropriate content for the play should be. As I highlighted in Chapter One with reference to Heiner Goebbels, a temporal distance is created between a past event and its reproduction in the theatre: “the scene pretends a proximity to us, which ultimately cannot be synchronized with our own sense of time” (31). The riots have been mediated and archived once already in the press – their story has already crystalized. Indeed, Billington complains that, coming three years later, Blythe’s work “lacks that sense of journalistic immediacy”, as if it is her job to act as a journalist, rather than a playwright (‘Little Revolution review’). Therefore, the divergence of Blythe’s production from the story of the riots that people may expect (the “promise” of the documentary that has already been mediatized) is frustrating for some. Hitchings’ review complains “there’s not enough sense of menace”, the same disappointment that the play does not deliver the violence that a play about ‘riots’ appears to promise.⁶⁰ Others note the muted tones of the play: “*Little Revolution* does not try to stir the audience with galvanic action. Much of it is laconic, fuelled by low-key tension and resignation” (Susannah Clapp, *The Observer*); “[s]he fails to reach its epicentre, she finds no ordering truths or principles in

⁶⁰ The expected focus on the riots has been highlighted by Garson who argues it “was promoted as a piece about the riots” which “[triggers] a certain kind of expectation” that “[accounts] for the reactions of numerous critics” (PhD thesis 217). The potential that the play would focus on the more violent side of the riots was, in my opinion, signposted in articles and trailers in its lead up. As I noted, the trailer for the show the Almeida released was menacing, and, in interviews and articles prior to its opening, Blythe suggests more ‘action’, than many critics claim it provided: “[t]he piece has a much broader appeal than that because of the mixed community from different sides of the street it’s representing on stage. I think it might be a very lively show indeed” (*Telegraph*).

the chaos [...] *Little Revolution* gets nowhere close to the heart of the matter.” (Stewart Pringle, *Exeunt*). Pringle concurs with Hitchings and Billington who accuse the play of focusing on the wrong voices, commenting “the young and the voiceless yet again displaced and silenced by the old and the vocal”. For Rebellato, the debate as to where the focus should lie is the play’s great success: “I think it's wonderful, not because it lets us know the true story of The Riots, but because it invites us to reflect on what that could possibly mean, and I love it because it stays with all the ambiguities to which this question gives rise” (‘Kant, Complexity...’). Interestingly, Bettina Auerswald suggests the clash of a verbatim theatre version of an event, and how we may otherwise have come to understand that event, highlights precariousness: “[w]hen verbatim theatre presents its version of the reality of an event, incident or topic, and it clashes with our own understanding of it, we have to face up to our precarious state” (116). I suggest that “[facing] up to [their] precarious state” is exactly what some of the critics of *Little Revolution* experienced, which led to their frustration with the play.

In order to offer a more complete analysis of the complexity of how voice is used, codified and reified as real in *Little Revolution*, I now turn to analysing the indexical traces of the real in this production, starting with technology.

4.7 Technology

4.7.1 *Technology and the Recorded Delivery technique*

Yvette Hutchinson claims that “[c]entral to verbatim theatre is the use of technology, both literally on stage and symbolically” (Hutchinson in Forsyth and Megson 210). As stated, Paget also attributes the rise in verbatim to technological developments: “the development of Verbatim Theatre can be said to have been facilitated by the portable cassette recorder” (‘Verbatim Theatre’ 318). Blythe’s practice relies on technology to a further degree than early practitioners who required it for collecting material, as recorded delivery depends on technology in performance too. This reliance on technology suggests it is an indexical trace of the real for Blythe.

Technology is also key to Blythe’s editing process, and in an interview with Simon Stephens, Blythe describes this and states that, following the research phase, she accumulates far more material than she needs for productions.⁶¹ At no point in the process does Blythe transcribe any of the audio she has recorded; instead she works in much the same way as a

⁶¹ In interview with Simon Stephens, Blythe guesses that, in researching *London Road*, she accumulated about “150 hours of recording” for what was eventually edited into a two hour show.

radio producer or television editor and listens “to hours and hours of audio”, using “a big screen”. For the first “long and boring” edit she listens to the material to “do a log”, noting down the time codes of events and dialogue. Following this, further edits add cuts in, and the play is then continually edited and shaped on a screen, until a final version is produced (Blythe in Stephens). The extent to which Blythe edits the original audio is apparent in the prompt copy of the script, held at the Almeida Theatre archive. For example, the beginning of Scene 36 in the script reads:

[Name redacted] stands just outside COLIN's barber's.

Music and laughter.

ALECKY. Hello!

[NAME REDACTED]. How you doing?

ALECKY. I'm o –

[NAME REDACTED]. COME AND HAVE A DRINK.

ALECKY. Can I talk to you in there because it's a bit noisy...Oh you can't smoke in there.

[NAME REDACTED]. No I can't.

ALECKY. How are you? You having a good time?

[NAME REDACTED]. Yeah I've just congratulated Marks & Spencers. *(Laughter.)*

(n.p)⁶²

In the final printed version of the script, Blythe cuts Alecky completely out of the scene, and the opening reads as follows:

⁶² I have redacted any names that appeared differently in the archival documents to the final named characters in the script, in order to protect the identity of the contributors.

DEANNE stands just outside COLIN's barber's.

Music and laughter.

DEANNE. How you doing? *(Beat.)* Come and have a drink. Ha ha ha ha. *(Beat.)* I just congratulated Mark's and Spencer's. *(Laughter.)* (78)

The stark difference between these two scenes reveals that edits to the script continue during rehearsals, and also that the final version of scenes can sound considerably different to what originally took place. This demonstrates Blythe's flexible approach to editing material, and the extent to which this editing takes place is obscured for an audience.

During the editing process, Blythe's focus is on creating a strong narrative, which is where the tension between the verbatim form and its claims to 'truth' and 'reality' arise. She describes the edit as "where the creative process really begins" and the use of the audio technology as allowing her "to link fragments to form a continuous narrative" (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 94). Blythe highlights the "struggle between remaining faithful to the interview and creating a dramatic narrative" (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 94) and suggests the answer is "balance" (Blythe in Megson 223). Her drive to create a strong narrative comes across forcefully in interviews:

In terms of editing things – making a good day a really good day, or a bad day a really bad day, whatever – that's my dramatic licence [*sic*] that comes into play in the edit and then the staging. It's not 'as it happened.' What I'm aspiring to be is a good dramatist. (Blythe in Megson 223)

For Blythe, technology provides her with access to the real, but it also allows her to turn that real into a dramatic narrative.

Technology continues to be crucial for Blythe in rehearsals too. When looking through documentation held in the *Little Revolution* archive at the Almeida Theatre, it became apparent that the Sound Department had an integral role in the creation of the production. For example, a document titled 'REHEARSAL NOTE 2', dated 23 July 2014 included the following note for the sound technicians:

SOUND

1. There are three tracks which would be incredibly helpful if you could clean up before Friday for Miss Ancona and Miss Ash.

This note reveals that technology is needed to clarify and enhance Blythe's original recordings, in order to be easily understood by actors in rehearsals.

The two pieces of technology which Blythe refers to most are the dictaphone she uses to record contributors, and the earphones the actors use in performance. Blythe highlights both as indexical traces of the real: for Blythe, the earphones allow actors to be “in the shadow” of the real voice they are hearing (Blythe in Stephens), and the dictaphone gives her “license into other people's lives” (“Too True?”). The word “into” is important as it suggests the dictaphone offers an opening, a route, a trace *into* the real lives of the contributors. As I referenced in Chapter One, Domietta Torlasco argues that such technological recordings “[bring] about the recurrence of the past of which they are the indexical trace” (95).



Fig. 1. Rez Kempton, Alecky Blythe with dictaphone, and Imogen Stubbs in *Little Revolution*. Photo by Manuel Harlan.

As a writer who relies on recorded testimony to collate her scripts, the dictaphone is Blythe's singular tool of power. She claims it allows her increased access to real people's intimate stories: “when you've kind of got this little thing in your hand, a Dictaphone or whatever, it sort of does give you a license, weirdly, to ask people questions that you maybe wouldn't normally ask them” (Blythe in Stephens). Blythe often depicts the dictaphone in a way that assumes it has agency separate to her human use of it. For example, she states “my dictaphone has taken me to some interesting places”, as though the dictaphone is the driving force behind the creative choices made during the research phases. The ‘power’ of the

dictaphone is also foregrounded during performance. It is often visibly present on stage in *Little Revolution* and we see Blythe holding it. The dictaphone's physical presence on stage exposes it as the essential piece of writing technology: it is her writer's 'pen' and without it she could not write. Indeed Blythe includes moments in the script where the technology fails and action is delayed because she forgets her dictaphone is turned off:

BOY ONLOOKER 1. Can you turn that off?

ALECKY. Okay.

Long silence as ALECKY goes over to the police who are searching the boy and starts talking to another onlooker, without her Dictaphone turned on. We see the action play out but hear nothing.

So tell me, tell me what happened again I don't I had the volume on. Oh God...

MAN ONLOOKER 1. You didn't have the volume / on?

ALECKY. No. Tell me / again. (59)

At this moment, the audience watch Blythe and another actor silently mime their words and this suggests to the spectators that, without the dictaphone turned on or working, there would be no voices heard on stage. The inference is that it is only through Blythe's active use of technology that the real voices are captured and able to be repeated audibly in performance. In revealing this reliance on the dictaphone in the creative process, Blythe suggests she is powerless to write without it, and that people's voices will be silenced without active use of it. As Garson writes, the "methodological approach" of headphone-verbatim "tends to fetishise the 'real' as audio technology can potentially repair the ontological shortcomings of verbatim theatre and give access to a seemingly unmediated voiceprint" (*Remixing...* 57-58). In this way, as Peirce writes, technology – for Blythe – "direct[s] the attention" to the real (*Philosophical Writings* 108). The following chapter reveals how Noble's use of a video camera operates in a similar way, whilst in Crouch's *An Oak Tree*, it is the textual presence of the script which is needed for performance on stage ("I'm going to get you some script") (41).

Throughout the play, there are also moments that suggest that, although she tries as much as possible to be a silent bystander, aiming for "a more 'fly on the wall' documentary style" the presence of Blythe's dictaphone alters the course of events (Blythe, *Cruising* 4). For example, in one scene Alecky records two men questioning police officers who are attempting to stop and search a man. Afterwards, the men suggest to Alecky that her presence,

and – moreover – the presence of her “device” (dictaphone) were a contributing factor to the behaviour of the police:

MAN ONLOOKER 1. See you being there was good.

ALECKY. Yeah.

MAN ONLOOKER 1. Because if you wasn't there or we wasn't there they woulda handled him shabbier.

MAN ONLOOKER 2. If you weren't there they woulda definitely tried something / silly?

MAN ONLOOKER 1. / Yeah.

ALECKY. Really?

MAN ONLOOKER 2. It was that device that more or less saved us. I'm telling / you da truth. (64-65)

The power of the dictaphone to “more or less [save]” people in difficult situations implies that people moderate their behaviour in its presence. Blythe, and the people that she interviews imbue the dictaphone with a special significance, and through highlighting the dictaphone and methodology of recorded delivery in her play Blythe reinforces the significance of technology to enable her to re-represent the real on stage. In this way, technology sharpens and heightens the real, and this section has demonstrated that, for Blythe, technology is essential at all stages of research, rehearsal and performance.

4.8 Presence

4.8.1 Presence as proximity – in space and time

In Chapter One, I introduced theories of ‘presence’ and highlighted that it can mean a shared spatial and temporal condition. This section deconstructs presence as proximity in space and time in *Little Revolution*, analysing Blythe’s use of ‘doubling’ in the play, and the ‘presence in absence’ generated by verbatim practice.

The manner in which Blythe undertakes her research is intended to reinforce presence as a shared time and, where possible, she gathers her material ‘in the moment’, as opposed to in a formal sit-down interview environment. She considers that “as much as possible you

want it to be happening and unfolding as you're on it" and claims that "a lot of my best moments are when you're there and you capture something that happens" (Blythe in Stephens). For Blythe, audio material recorded "live" in the present moment rather than after the event has occurred is closer to a more accurate representation of real life. Blythe suggests one of the ways this is made possible is through the disappearance of the microphone: "I often feel that I get my best material in an event, when people are not so focused on the fact there's someone with a microphone in front of them" (*Little Revolution* 5-6). Blythe suggests that, for interviewees, awareness of the presence of the microphone is diminished in the melee of the live event, as opposed to the dominance of a microphone in a contrived interview setting, which is framed by the act of recording. Whilst I am not totally convinced that an awareness of the dictaphone evaporates as easily as Blythe suggests, it is certainly pertinent that in her research she attempts presence as a shared time with her interviewees, arguing that this generates the "best material".

Presence as shared time is also key to the recorded delivery technique in rehearsal and performance. Blythe argues that, for actors, the technique demands presence, in terms of presence as 'presentness' – being in the present tense, being "really in the moment" (Blythe in Stephens). For actors, the concentration required increases awareness of the present moment:

There's little room in your actor's head for the judgmental 'that went really well' or 'I got a laugh on that line, great:' as soon as you start thinking your actor's thoughts, then you've lost where you are in the audio. It keeps you so present. I think it makes average actors better than they are: it keeps them on track, in the present, which is great. (Blythe in Megson 225)

The live immediacy that the technique demands encourages a focus on "nowness" in the theatre. Andy Lavender suggests that "[t]heatre has always traded in nowness, and at various points in history has developed new ways in which to heighten the spectator's awareness of the present moment" (in Delgado and Svich 189). Blythe's work develops this "nowness" a stage further – the actors, as well as the spectators experience a heightened awareness of the present moment.

In Chapter One, I also introduced the significance of taking up physical space in an embodied way to theories of presence. Blythe is present in *Little Revolution* (in performance and the play text) both as the author, and as a character. Most critics mentioned this casting choice as a standout feature of the performance, and what was especially noticeable is the derogatory way Blythe's performance is described. Clapp writes that Blythe "plays an irritating version of herself, conducting interviews with a clipped voice and high-pitched

giggle” (*The Observer*); Trueman suggests she “portrays herself in a severely unflattering light”; Pringle complains “[s]he’s patronizing, try-hard and desperately irritating as she plaintively pursues her subjects with cries of ‘I write plays!’ and tries to explain what verbatim means without sounding like a tosser” (*Exeunt*); Taylor that she does “a consciously annoying self-caricature” (*Independent*), and Shuttleworth comments “Blythe is played by Blythe, complete with sometimes inane questions and embarrassed, embarrassing giggles” (*Financial Times*). These personal and somewhat belittling attacks on Blythe’s “irritating” persona are intriguing. Firstly, the use of phrases such as “plays [a] version”, “portrays herself”, and “self-caricature” seem to erase knowledge of the recorded delivery technique and suggest that Blythe is ‘playing’ herself annoyingly as a specific ‘Stanislvskian’ character choice, rather than simply accurately repeating the audio she listens to. Further, the personal – and I would contend somewhat misogynistic – terms used to describe Blythe are not a common feature of critical writing on verbatim theatre. In no other reviews of Blythe’s work have I noticed such a visceral personality attack of a character. I deduce this is because of the heightened awareness that characters in verbatim plays are representative of real-life people, and there is an unwillingness to cause any undue offence to that real person. Indeed, to what extent is it possible to ‘review’ the exact portrayal of a real-life person, for surely then one is reviewing the real-life person themselves, rather than the writer’s imagination, or actor’s performance? However, Blythe is not only the author of the play and an actor in it, but also one of these real-life people too. Interestingly, by singling out Blythe for a ‘character assassination’ and suggesting she has purposefully made an actor’s choice in how to play herself, these critics turn Blythe from the real person that she is into a character.

Despite some critics’ classification of Blythe as a character, the presence of Blythe helps suggest to the audience that the play is real – she was actually there when these events happened. Her embodied presence in the theatre and proximity to the audience links them to the real events that are being re-represented. Blythe’s physical presence on stage – recording dictaphone in hand – highlights her dominance as the author of the play. Blythe is the only actor on stage who repeats her own original speech; the rest are actors repeating the words of others. By using other voices in the text, Blythe celebrates a multiplicity of individual voices and this is certainly an intention of her work. However, her physical presence as the author who records them – clearly highlighted in the script, “I’m Alecky Blythe and I make documentary plays so the actors kind of portray the real-/life people” – suggests Blythe retains the authoritative power of the author (*Little Revolution* 25). Blythe’s physical presence and highlighting herself as author is, paradoxically, a metatheatrical means of suggesting to

her audience that the play has *not* been authored, but instead, transposed from real life. As the following chapter details, this is also the case for Kim Noble's work.⁶³

4.8.2 Presence as possession

In Chapter One, I highlighted the hauntological meanings of the word 'presence', how the term "can relate to a thing or person that is unseen but asserts themselves" and that this "ghostly inhabitation" aligns with the metaphorical qualities of theatre (see p.50 of this thesis). Verbatim theatre, and recorded delivery in particular, is often discussed in terms of this hauntology. As Richard Schechner explains when discussing the recorded delivery work of Anna Deavere Smith:

She does not 'act' the people you see and listen to in *Fires in the Mirror*. She 'incorporates' them [...] by means of deep mimesis, a process opposite to that of 'pretend.' To incorporate means to be possessed by, to open oneself up thoroughly and deeply to another being. ('Acting as Incorporation' 63)

Schechner compares Smith to a "shaman" and draws attention to the way in which she undertakes her research as the enabling factor in her 'shamanistic' abilities:

Meeting people face-to-face made it possible for Smith to move like them, sound like them, and allow what they were to enter her own body. This is a dangerous process, a form of shamanism. ('Acting as Incorporation' 64)

For Schechner, Deavere Smith's great triumph is her ability to 'double' herself so that her own presence, and the presence of her interviewees, simultaneously share the stage. He suggests that

Smith's shamanic invocation is her ability to bring into existence the wondrous 'doubling' that marks great performances. This doubling is the simultaneous presence of performer and performed. Because of this doubling Smith's audiences – consciously perhaps, unconsciously certainly – learn to 'let the other in,' to accomplish in their own way what Smith so masterfully achieves. ('Acting as Incorporation' 64)

Deavere Smith does discuss her work in terms of a sort of shamanic possession, but through describing the power of words: "[m]y grandfather told me that if you say a word often

⁶³ It can also be argued that the presence of the writers in these texts actually serves to highlight their fictionality. Dan Rebellato pursues this line of enquiry and argues that several writers place themselves inside their plays to "draw attention to the writerly status of the texts" ('Exit the Author' 25). This could be said for Crouch in *An Oak Tree* who places himself as a rehearsed actor in his text, in contrast with the instinctive responses given by the second actor.

enough, it becomes you. [...] manipulating words has a spiritual power” (‘The Word Becomes You’ 51). For Deavere Smith, the ritualistic repetition of words allows her to integrate her own self with that of the other’s identity:

You listen to some of the characters and you begin to identify with them. Because I’m saying the stuff over and over again every night, part of me is becoming them through repetition – by doing the performance of themselves that they do. (‘The Word Becomes You’ 57)

In this way, Deavere Smith’s transformation creates a kind of ‘presence in absence’ doubling: she is simultaneously herself (and not herself), and the other (and not the other). Blythe similarly considers that repeating the original voice is all an actor needs to successfully inhabit a person in performance. She claims that, with the recorded delivery practice “[y]ou’re not just following *what* people say but *how* they say it, with the intonation, with the breath, and so it’s quite transformative” (Blythe in Megson 224, my emphasis). Blythe thus aligns her practice with the new trend in theatre of the real that I have noticed – the move from an interest in *what*, to *how*, in creating the real on stage. A feature of her rehearsal process is to offer actors little information about the real person they are representing because she believes listening to the voice is the key actors need to recreate likeness on stage:

When actors first listen to an interview I do not tell them too much about the people behind the words, because they might subconsciously colour in and enhance things too much around a back story I have given them...it is better to just sort of start clean from the voice...I ask actors to just ‘do it’. (Forsyth 119)

For Blythe, the idiosyncrasies of everyday speech offer an understanding of a person’s train of thought: “[k]eeping the stutters and hesitations is a brilliant clue as to where thought is coming from” (Blythe in Cavendish). More than this, Blythe suggests that, by faithfully following the recorded delivery, an actor is able to ‘find’ their character more quickly:

It’s often really impressive how quickly the actor ‘finds’ the character, if they are doing the technique faithfully, which actually requires not doing too much ‘acting’ but just listening and repeating, VERY precisely. (Forsyth 119)

This statement suggests that, for Blythe, an actor can directly access the fundamental essence of a person’s character by listening to a recording of their real voice. Adam Cork, the composer of *London Road*, states “the actors find they are inhabited (or possessed) by the voices of the people they represent, rather than creating roles using the traditional rules of characterisation” (Cork in Blythe, *London Road* x). The terms “inhabited” and “possessed”

suggest the actors undergo a haunting by the voice they listen to. Rather than playing any active part in characterisation, the actor behaves like a spiritual medium – a vessel through which the real essence of a person is channelled. In this way, ‘voice’ acquires paranormal, magical attributes – whatever it touches is spontaneously transformed.⁶⁴ Despite the suggestion of the actor’s vocal absorption, aspects of Blythe’s technique also work to remind the audience that the voice is a ghostly, disembodied citation of the original speaker. Paradoxically, the presence of the original contributor is strongly suggested through their re-represented voice, despite their bodily absence.

In Blythe’s plays the earphones are used to remind the audience of the presence of the original contributors. In his work on *The Girlfriend Experience*, Joe Hill-Gibbins hoped their visual presence would “make it clear that they are actors and this is a recreation” (Hill-Gibbins in Cantrell 230). Blythe highlights the problems of the earphones becoming less visible as the sophistication of her production values increased:

you get to the end of the show, and the audience would have maybe no idea that the actors were listening to real interviews through earphones even though you put it in the programme or whatever. They need to know, I felt it was important that they should [...] This is what happened and this is how she said it: she was that cutting to her friend, that moment really happened... (Blythe in Megson 226).

In *Little Revolution*, the earphones powerfully highlight the absent contributors, especially because, at the start of the production, Blythe includes a scene in which she explains her technique to young people auditioning for the community chorus (“thanks for giving up your Saturday morning er to come and try out for our community chorus”), which then segues into her playing a soundscape to begin the play: “[s]he goes to her lap top. [...] She taps the volume key. Soundscape starts to build, first from lap top the into speakers over the P.A.” (prompt copy, *Little Revolution* archive). The highlighting of technique and original recorded audio is a feature of her other plays too. For example, in *London Road* original audio was also used in the production: “[o]riginal audio recordings of various residents at the party are heard over the PA in the auditorium. They fade out as the music of the song begins” (78). According to Garson, this use of audio technology “informs our acts of spectating as a theatre audience” as “headphone-verbatim clearly displays both its technique and origin”, rather than concealing dramaturgical processes (‘Remixing...’ 54).

⁶⁴ Deavere Smith discusses her practice in similar terms, though her focus is on language use, as opposed to voice: “[t]o me, the most important doorway into the soul of a person is her or his words, or any other external communication device. I am a student of words” (*Talk To Me* 12).

Blythe's attempt to expose the process seems contradictory to her claim that the voice is key to character creation. Drawing attention to the process makes the suggestion that actors 'find' their character through listening to the voice harder to assert: the treatment of the voice becomes purely a mechanism, not a direct route to the 'truth' of a character. Furthermore, the lack of authority the actor has over this voice and the absence of the original speaker from the stage almost suggests, in theatrical terms, that the actor is simply an understudy. And, as Marvin Carlson suggests in *The Haunted Stage* with reference to understudies, "the work of a stand-in is frequently ghosted to a significant degree, not by his or her own past work but by that of the actor being replaced" (76). The actor is ghosted by the real person they are replacing. So, rather than being the key to character creation as Blythe suggests, the voice actually serves to remind the audience of the impossibility of creating a character from a real person – the voice can never escape the ghostly presence of its original owner.

Despite Blythe's claim that "I think the actors have them (the real people) in their minds and in their bodies. I think it just takes you over" (in Taylor 'Interview' 13), I contend the assertion actors experience a miraculous 'ghosting' moment that allows them to somehow inhabit the presence of contributors is problematic. The idea that an inner truth of the original person can be magically transported into the actor is disputable, particularly because it seems to neglect the physicality of the actor on stage. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues for the significance of embodiedness:

Moreover, it is essential to me not only to have a body, but to have *this* body. It is not only the notion of the body which, through that of the present, is necessarily linked to that of the for-itself; the actual existence of my body is indispensable to that of my 'consciousness.' (431)

Merleau-Ponty equates the perceptual subject with the lived body: a person's unique existence depends upon the synthesis of their body with their conscious perception. The lived body is therefore understood as the expression of our conscious selves. In contrast, Blythe's practice presumes the opposite by elevating the status of speech in the creation of character: "[t]he voice tells us so much about an individual that the actors have a very strong sense of the characters they are playing without ever having met them" (in Forsyth 119-120). This locates character within the voice. The actor's ability to instantly recreate a person's character through hearing a voice seems to suggest a person's bodily presence is irrelevant to their total being. If the actor can easily find the core of a person just through listening to and repeating their voice, this implies the body is not central to a person's character. Blythe claims that the "voice tells us so much" (in Forsyth 119), personifying the voice (the voice "tells us" – it is

active), which suggests it has agency independent from the body that has produced it. For Blythe, the voice appears to have the ability to transfer from one body to another. However, this new body – the actor’s body – will inevitably look and move differently from that of the original interviewee. Even though an actor may produce vocal sounds similar to the original speaker, they will probably not move (or be embodied) like them. Therefore, removing the voice from the speaker’s original body and privileging it over bodily movement is an incorporeal approach to accessing character and understanding the nature of the subject. The focus on the free-floating voice rather than the body suggests character resides in the voice, and not the subject as an embodied being.

This detachment of speech from the body can have the effect of rendering the original speakers as alien to themselves. The Eurocrat Martin Westlake, who was represented as a character in Blythe’s play *I Only Came Here For Six Months* (2005), describes this: “[m]y wife thought the actor (a nice young blond chap) had got me off to a tee. I wasn’t so sure. Was I really so pompous? Did I really say that?”. The fracturing of his own voice from his body and transposition of it in another rendered Westlake as unrecognisable to himself. His self-perception and the structure of his own experience have been disturbed through the separation of voice and body. In this way, Blythe’s practice denies original speakers a substantial union with their own body and, in trapping them outside of their bodies, her technique encourages the idea that identity is incorporeal. Blythe’s claim that character is ‘found’ in the voice eradicates Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the body remains at the core of a person’s unique position in the world: “[i]t is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive ‘things’” (186). Merleau-Ponty’s conflation of the body with metaphysical perception is at odds with Blythe’s claim that the voice indexically points to whole attributes of a real person.

The decentering of the body was particularly prevalent in Blythe’s early work in which she experimented with placing voices inside bodies of actors who did not match the original gender, age or ethnicity of the primary speaker: “[i]n the casting process we really played around with things and we cast against gender and age, and also we were all younger actors” (Blythe in Taylor, ‘Interview...’ 8). The choice to place a voice in a juxtaposing body destabilises the audience expectation, as Blythe explains:

the contrast between what they were saying and how they appeared subverted stereotypes and challenged the audience’s preconceptions. People’s words become all the more resonant when they are coming from the mouth of a person you would never expect to be saying them. (in Hammond and Steward 98)

The rhetoric Blythe uses here is revealing and suggests that voice (“people’s words”) can become more meaningful when transplanted into a body that is physically different from the one it originated from. Despite the audience not necessarily equating the actor’s body with the voice that inhabits it, Blythe believes that the voice alone provides them with enough to imagine the original character of the person, their essential ‘spirit’. This process of casting renders the body simply a vessel, a conduit for transmitting voice and character, not integral to character itself. The decentering of the body in this way suggests the voice can be easily separated from the body that produced it. I explore the decentering of the body in the following chapter when I discuss how Noble constructs a female persona through using vocal distortion and internet messages.

However, voices are distinctive to the bodies that create them and the voice is a sound made through bodily functions using the vocal chords, lungs, larynx and articulators. Blythe acknowledges the importance of the body in creating sounds and appears to suggest the actors undergo some form of embodiment when replicating the audio recordings:

as they copy the voice more precisely they have to put their faces into the shape that is actually how that person’s face is, because in order to make that sound...they become them physically by becoming them vocally. (in Taylor, ‘Interview’ 10)⁶⁵

This statement, whilst recognising a connection between body, voice and being, is still not close to the understanding of unity that Merleau-Ponty argues for. Instead, the voice has been separated from the unique characteristics of its original body and now exists outside it. It cannot return to existing within the body of its original owner and in its banishment the person loses a key aspect of their identity. The lived bodily experience is something Blythe’s actors can only superficially recreate through facial gestures; the totality of the original body is too far removed from them. Blythe’s actors may appear to create a character, but the original character of the person they represent remains unified with their unique body – a body that exists away from the theatrical stage.

The continued bodily existence of Blythe’s interviewees in the present world problematises how they are represented in the play because it creates a temporal distance between the real person and their representation. Chapter One described Cormac Power’s work on presence in theatre which highlights the complexity of this temporal distance between the stage world and the real world: “a fictional ‘now’ often coexists in tension with

⁶⁵ Deavere Smith also discusses this process: “I’ve realized now what is going on. My body begins to do the things that he probably must do inside while he’s speaking” (‘The Word Becomes You’ 57).

the stage ‘now’” (4). In *Little Revolution*, the recording that we hear the actors recreate offers a single snapshot of these people from the past. In the time between the original recording and the performance, these people have likely changed, developed – perhaps even died – and so the ‘past-them’ that we hear is possibly no longer compatible with their ‘present-them’. Even though the play is performed as though it is happening in the present moment, the interviewees are historically trapped into this singular vocal moment from the past – a moment that is cemented in the audio recording – it is now fixed, unchangeable, and exists permanently. What is being discussed here, is a question of the archive, and it is to this indexical trace of the real to which I now turn.

4.9 Archive

4.9.1 Audio archiving creates the event

The description of *Little Revolution* on the Almeida’s website encourages patrons to consider the play a form of archive of the riots, as opposed to a creative contrivance. As stated, on the Almeida Theatre website, *Little Revolution* is described as an “explosive new play” that “records the voices and stories of a community as the riots happened to their present-day aftermath”. There are two aspects I wish to interrogate in this description. The latter term suggests that, within the play, there is a complex temporal web between the original event and its aftermath, as my last section on ‘presence’ demonstrated. The use of the term “records” is also significant. The *OED* defines ‘record’ as “a thing constituting a piece of evidence about the past, especially an account kept in writing or some other permanent form”. The Almeida Theatre’s framing of *Little Revolution* as a ‘record’ suggests that the play retained a special permanence, beyond the ephemerality typical of theatre – a permanence held to represent factual evidence of the riots. It is this framing of the play as an archival record of the riots that I contend led to the critical dispute over its intended focus: certain critics were perplexed that Blythe’s sedate archive of events at the periphery of the riots did not fit with the more violent representation of the riots already archived and presented by the press.⁶⁶ In his review of *Little Revolution*, Trueman draws attention to how Blythe archives the events of the riots through

⁶⁶ Imogen Tyler describes how the media coverage of the riots led to “panicked assertions in the new media that the riots were contagious and uncontrollable, and for a while this is how it felt both to the rioters and to the wider public” (180). Tyler notes how, after the riots, the media behaved in league with the police, printing mug-shot CCTV photographs, encouraging the public to identify rioters: “media journalists were transformed into vigilante crime fighters, inviting the public to assist them in cleaning up the streets” (194).

her play and suggests that her inclusion of other journalist characters in the piece also trying to get their stories highlights this:

Remember what they say about the victors writing history. *Little Revolution* suggests the opposite: that whosoever controls history winds up victorious. Blythe wasn't the only one out seeking the story that night. Sometimes it seems that she can't get close to the action for all the others doing likewise. Her Dictaphone brims with journalists. [...] All of them snapping away on their camera phones, trying to capture some piece of the action, some shard of the story.

The inclusion of journalists and their recording equipment in the play was obviously an important choice for Blythe and her fellow creatives. In the *Little Revolution* archive, a document titled 'Recording Equipment Price Breakdown' reveals a large amount of recording equipment for the stage management to source, including: "'Dictaphones', 'Press video Camera', 'Small Handheld Camera', 'Shoulder Mounted Cameras', 'Press style Optical zoom Cameras', 'Amateur press camera'". A significant proportion of the budget was given to this equipment, suggesting that for Blythe it was important for the audience to see the amount of recording technology that her Dictaphone captured.

The incorporation of journalists in the piece also presents an interesting contrast to Blythe. Verbatim playwrights and journalists do share some attributes, but are often unhelpfully conflated. The ambiguity of the verbatim playwright's role alongside journalists in exciting events is highlighted in *Little Revolution* when Blythe finds herself unable to definitely describe if she is a writer:

AMERICAN JOURNALIST. Can you step back a little bit?

ALECKY. Yeah sure.

AMERICAN JOURNALIST. Lovely thanks.

ALECKY. Right sorry.

AMERICAN JOURNALIST. Cos you're a writer aren't you?

ALECKY. Yes, yeah / I'm not... yeah.

AMERICAN JOURNALIST. / No – Yes...okay...sort of. (*Little Revolution* 39)

The journalist's insistence that Alecky should not physically be where she is standing "cos" she's "a writer" implies that he views reporting as the key response to the situation they are in

in, rather than writing, which is reinforced when he says to Alecky “[d]o you mind waiting / a second do you mind?” after she tries to ask the character Siva a question. By silencing Alecky and denying her physical space at a scene of interest, the journalist inheres that their occupation creates a more important archive than Blythe’s.

However, the scene I discussed earlier, in which Blythe’s microphone is turned off, shows the audience that archived action on the stage – indeed language itself – stops when the dictaphone is not present and turned on. In this way, Blythe suggests the dictaphone itself constructs the text and that it is the central ‘writer’ of the text – the dictaphone as archivist. This contributes to the sense that the play is a piece of real life, archived – a moment in time Blythe randomly happened upon (as items accidentally end up in archives), rather than anything more contrived. With reference to Susan Sontag, Chapter One detailed that the archival appeal of photographs, is that they have “the status of found objects” and therefore carry “the magic of the real” (*On Photography* 69). Similarly, the recordings Blythe makes also have the status of “found objects”, and therefore also trade on the allure of the real.

As I highlighted in Chapter One, in *Archive Fever* Derrida argues the way in which past events are archived directly impacts on the content of the events, and this is something confirmed by other theorists such as Sontag. Derrida suggests the choice to archive an event is responsible for the event itself and the act of archiving is what gives moments power and significance (*Archive Fever* 16-17). Sontag similarly suggests the archive stipulates “that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened” (*Regarding* 76 – 77). Blythe’s recorded delivery technique is a form of audio archiving: she often chooses to interview people on the peripheries of events and these people’s voices would likely otherwise go unrecorded. As Steedman writes, the archive is “selected and consciously chosen documentation” (see Chapter One), and Blythe has consciously selected to document the periphery of events (68). Blythe is attracted to the ordinariness of people and wanting to represent the unrepresented, or expose a previously hidden aspect of society.⁶⁷ In capturing her contributors’ voices from one singular time period, the danger is that a superficial version of these people is archived – one that does not always correlate with their own experience, even their experience of being recorded. Blythe describes the disappointment of a contributor from *I Only Came Here for Six Months*: “from his point of view, I ended up editing out many of his more endearing qualities” (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 95).

⁶⁷ With *The Girlfriend Experience* (Royal Court, 2008) Blythe hoped to expose a new side to the world of sex work: “I believe that these women see my play as a genuine opportunity to show the outside world a side of prostitution that is rarely seen”; “they broke the stereotype of working girls that is the presented in the media” (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 82, *The Girlfriend Experience* 1).

Blythe highlights an example of the impact of this temporal dissonance when describing the words of a text message from one of the original contributors of *Little Revolution* following watching the show: “it was shit” (‘Making Verbatim Theatre’ panel). Blythe explained the woman was angry after watching the production because she felt a campaign she ran was depicted to look like a failure when, in fact, the campaign was eventually successful. Because the play only captured a snapshot of a small moment in time, it did not show the outcome of the campaign: for the woman, her story was reduced to something other than her own experience. As opposed to the contributors’ character being “found” by the actors in the archived voice, as Blythe suggests, Blythe’s archive has created a specific impression of these characters (Blythe in Forsyth 119). She has constructed the audio archive of these vocal moments and her re-figuring of the archive as theatre sharply localises these moments in a specific time and space, affording them an importance that they might not otherwise have gained. Chapter One drew attention to the work of Diana Taylor who argues that embodied performance (like *Little Revolution*) can be considered a way to archivally transmit knowledge through presence: “people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there’” (20). In some way, *Little Revolution* gave audiences a way to ‘be there’ at the riots, and therefore, a way to gain a knowledge and impression of them. However, I also highlighted Susan Sontag’s warning in Chapter One that the “problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs” and that “[s]omething becomes real – to those who are elsewhere... by being photographed” (*Regarding the Pain of Others* 79, 19): Blythe’s editing of the audio archive into a performance event creates the way this event will be archived and remembered. For an audience who did not directly experience events surrounding the London riots, the events Blythe portrays in *Little Revolution* may become the definitive impression of that experience.

In *Little Revolution*, people Blythe interacts with sometimes appear to be actively archiving moments as they happen. For example, Sarah says to Alecky “[c]an I just say you’re missing some quality chat over here?”, directing Alecky’s attention to what she believes is a particularly interesting discussion that deserves to be recorded (79). In this way, it is not only Blythe who is responsible for shaping and editing the way these events will be archived, but the contributors as well. The character of Deanne also tells Alecky what she believes deserves a permanent inscription in writing: “[t]hey’re just holding him so you make sure you write that down. They’re just holding him” (84). The presence of the dictaphone has attuned contributors to the possibility that their words may be offered a permanence and,

because of this, they take on the writerly position of deciding what should be afforded a place in the archive of Blythe's play.

Blythe, of course, retains the ultimate power of the archivist in both research and editing – deciding when to turn the dictaphone on and off, and which sections of audio to move and delete. In Chapter One I discussed how the archive assumes passivity through just sitting “there until is read, and used, and narrativised” (Steedman 68), but that actually it is a means of control. However, in *Little Revolution*, Blythe's powerful position as the archivist creating the events is foregrounded and evidenced. At times, she intervenes in events, informing Sadie and Kate from the Pembury estate about a Clapton Square Users Group tea party that they were unaware of: “there's gonna be um, there's a meeting and they're having a tea party?” (54). The division between the Pembury estate mothers and Clapton Square Users Group is a theme of the play, and towards the end of the show, Blythe introduces representatives from the two groups (Sadie, a mother, and Councillor Ian Rathbone): “Ian, this is Sadie. Sadie this is...” (87). Whilst she lets the meeting play out between the two groups, her initial introduction of the two suggests that perhaps she is responsible for setting the meeting up. If not, Blythe's introduction implies that she has positioned herself as a central figure in the community. Further, through connecting the two central threads of her story, she is ‘writing’ her play in the moment.

Blythe's fastidious attention to the exact record of the voice can be considered a kind of audio archiving, as discussed. However, it is not just contributors' voices that Blythe is keen to repeat as accurately as possible. In reading through the *London Road* archive held at the National Theatre Archives, it became apparent that the detail with which the actors recreate the original voices in the recorded delivery technique was demanded across the other production departments too. For example, in the document ‘Rehearsal Notes 9’, dated Wednesday 9 March 2011, there is a stage management note for the ‘Sound’ department which reads:

1. Please can we have a sound effect of Bailey the dog barking. This will be used at least twice, currently being used in “Cellular Material”. The original Bailey the dog has been described by Miss Blythe as being “a wiry, yappy, dog, possibly a Westie, but not a pure breed”. Thank you.

The following document, ‘Rehearsal Notes 10’, dated the following day – Thursday 10 March 2011 – offers an addition to this request: “[i]n amendment to yesterday's notes (notes 9) after further investigation by Miss Blythe, Bailey the dog is in fact a Maltese, thank you”. I presume that “further investigation by Miss Blythe” indicates that Blythe contacted the

contributor who owns the dog (the character of Julie in the script) in order to ascertain its breed. This level of rigorous detail in order to serve the simple stage direction “*Bailey the dog is yapping*” (48) reveals the lengths to which Blythe goes to accurately replicate her original experience on stage.⁶⁸ In this way, Blythe is a kind of archivist, meticulously piecing back together archival evidence that will offer the audience clues to the past, and real life.

Documents held in the *Little Revolution* archive also provide evidence that all areas of a production team working on a recorded delivery play consider themselves to be similar to archivists, responsible for preserving and unearthing the past. The word ‘real’ is used a considerable number of times in rehearsal notes instructing different production teams on necessary action. For example, in a document titled ‘REHEARSAL NOTES 6’, dated Wednesday 29 July 2014, the note for the Wardrobe Department reads:

WARDROBE

1. The real Colin has Glasses.
2. The real [name redacted] walks with a stick.

This suggests that for Blythe and the production, it was important to remain accurate to not only the voice of the original speakers, but even their appearance – despite the fact the addition of ‘glasses’ and a ‘stick’ has no relevant bearing on the stage action. However, in a document outlining the costume plan in the *Little Revolution* archive, it is written that the actors “will be wearing a costume which transposes the hallmarks of their key character onto the actors (we may not do verbatim costuming.... but channel the intention of the dress code of the character on to the cast in a way which works on the cast”. The debate as to whether to “do verbatim costuming” or instead adopt a less exacting approach to the costume reveals that questions concerning how closely to re-represent the original real permeate through all areas of production. This level of thought and detail is also apparent in the effort that was given to sourcing props. In the document titled ‘REHEARSAL NOTES 18’, dated Friday 8 August, a note reads “[c]an we see if we can get one or two original copies of the newspaper Siva was on the front page of?” Many of the notes have variants of “need to discuss with Alecky”

⁶⁸ For the critic Alice Saville, this attention to detail makes her query the “reality” of Blythe’s productions. In an article for *Exeunt Magazine*, Saville writes that the “precise moment I lost faith in the authenticity of *London Road*” was hearing Rufus Norris explain “that he and writer Alecky Blythe had traipsed back to Ipswich late in the production process exclusively to tape Julie [...] saying two words: ‘Come in.’ [...] The anecdote was meant to demonstrate their obsessively meticulous artistic process and loving devotion to ‘the truth’. But to me it did the opposite – if they’re contriving scenes from a cut-and-paste of dialogue snippets, they’re collecting intonation, not reality.”

placed next to them, which implies that – as stated – Blythe’s presence at the event (and therefore memory of it, or notes taken) is a way for the production team to access the real.

4.10 Alecky Blythe and precarity

Blythe’s use of indexical traces of the real enable her to stage precarity, as this next section will demonstrate. Theatre of the real is often considered a theatrical form which can address complex political issues and unfolding societal crises. Several scholars connect the rise of documentary and verbatim theatre throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century to the events of 9/11: Luckhurst writes “[v]erbatim theatre has proliferated in Europe and North America since the 1990s, and post 9/11 has become increasingly visible on both mainstream and fringe stages” (200), and Waters states the increase in verbatim theatre coalesced with “September 11 when politics seemed back in town” (139). Yvette Hutchinson also considers that the new wave of verbatim was prompted by the precarity following 9/11:

The foregrounding of verbatim as a significant form of theatre in addressing debates on terrorism, human rights violations and the ubiquitous fear following 9/11 suggests that theatre plays an important role in a time of extreme sociopolitical anxiety. (210)

The seeming spread of fear that 9/11 generated is partly attributed to the extensive global media coverage of this tragedy, as I outlined in Chapter Two. Alison Forsyth corroborates this, writing that the accessibility and ubiquity of media coverage of 9/11 presented a new challenge to documentary theatremakers as to how to represent real life on stage:

Following the catastrophe of 9/11, documentary theatre makers have been challenged as never before to convey ‘the real’ to an audience that continues to be bombarded on a daily basis, with startling immediacy, by a form of mediatised shorthand for the traumatic – moving, static and repeated graphic images of war, death and mayhem. (140-141)

Forsyth states that 9/11 altered an understanding of the real. Although the events of 9/11 and the London riots are evidently incomparable, it is of interest that the starting point for Blythe’s play *Come Out Eli* was to investigate ‘fear’, which perhaps speaks to an increased generalised feeling of ongoing fear and precarity since 9/11 that theatre-makers have been responding to.

Although the aim of Blythe’s productions is not one of didactic education, or consciousness-raising (“[w]hat I’m aspiring to be is a good dramatist”, she tells Chris Megson (223)) the theme of ‘crisis’ has undoubtedly been a central feature of Blythe’s plays. Several

of her plays address how a community responds to significant events, often traumatic, which Blythe herself recognises:

Come Out Eli established a formula that I used for *Strawberry Fields* and my other early plays. It was essentially about a community reacting to an event, and was fashioned from numerous interviews with a variety of people. (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 84)

In interview with Blythe, Chris Megson notes “[t]he way you gravitate towards these situations is by looking at the periphery: it’s not the earthquake, it’s the aftershocks”, to which Blythe responds “I’ve discovered there’s interest there. People on the outside, even though they are not right at the nucleus, are affected in the ripples and reveal something about their lives” (Blythe in Megson 222). In making the case that communities on the periphery of tragedies are affected in “ripples”, Blythe’s remark draws attention to our Butlerian precarity to the Other: “there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know” (Butler xii). The lives of the people in the communities that Blythe writes about are thrown into both personal and social chaos by strangers, and Blythe’s plays investigate their reaction to this. In this way, she reveals the “active” relationship between existential and societal precarity that Butler articulates (Butler in Puar 169).

Blythe suggests interviewing communities on the edge of crises foregrounds stories the media may bypass in their coverage: “I realized there was something to glean from stories further away from the centre that don’t get in the papers” (Blythe in Megson 223). Further, Blythe details that situating herself to one side of a traumatic event allows for humour to enter her work: “I know with my work there is a tendency for some lightness and humour. [...] When it’s not the people who are directly affected, there’s a little bit more space for lightness” (Blythe in Megson 223). This next section explores how Blythe articulates the precarious experience of the communities she researches, through both content and form. I begin by analysing *Little Revolution* in terms of Butler’s existential precarity, and then in terms of Berlant’s societal precarity, followed by analysis of how the form of Blythe’s plays also respond to precarity. I then introduce the notion of ‘post-traumatic kitsch theatre’, which I claim is a useful way to understand the aesthetic and politics of Blythe’s work.

4.10.1 *Little Revolution and existential precarity: content*

By taking her subject as the 2011 riots, Blythe instantly ensures that her play speaks to ideas about precarity. Imogen Tyler highlights how precarious situations related to unemployment

were a motivating factor for some of the rioters: “it was precisely the abject feelings of worthlessness induced by long-term unemployment which they used to attempt to legitimize their participation in violent disorder” (200). Tyler argues that it was the feeling created by deprivation which was a contributing factor for participation in the riots: “it was not economic deprivation alone which led to the rioting but a sense of invisibility, or alienation and frustration rooted in feelings of abandonment by the state” (197). This connection between economic deprivation and the negative feelings that it produces demonstrates the link between societal and existential precarity, and Blythe’s play performs this link.

The content of the story Blythe follows in *Little Revolution* demonstrates precarity as understood by both Judith Butler and Lauren Berlant. The period of the riots and short time that followed depicted in *Little Revolution* appears to be one that Butler would describe as “heightened vulnerability and aggression” (*Precarious Life* xi). Several characters disclose to Alecky their fear and vulnerability during the riot situation. In the first scene, ‘Romanian Man’ discusses the riots as a frightening, unprecedented event: “I’m little bit scary-ed but, I dunno because in my country, never like dat. Never like dat” (15). His fear and vulnerability are mirrored and repeated by other characters throughout. For example, Father Rob, the rector of Hackney describes the night of the riot as “quite scary standing out there for some of it all, but uh – it really was” (17) and Sarah, a local resident, reflects on how that night made her feel fearful: “I reacted... from a state of fear [...] I didn’t feel brave enough to go out there and I felt very vulnerable you know” (31).

This vulnerability that the characters describe is predicated on a feeling that the unfolding events are unpredictable in their nature. The character of Tony describes how the unpredictable escalation forces him and Sarah to pack their bags in preparation to flee: “at that point Sarah and I literally had all our bags packed and n-the back door open ready to get out the back door” (17-18). Blythe shows it is not just older middle-class characters who feel on edge during the riots – Welder John comments “[i]f you get caught up in it ya dunno what they’re fucking doing do ya” (15) and the character of ‘Boy 1 in Baseball Cap’ says to Alecky “you don’t know what, who or what’s gonna do what at any moment” (21). His repetition of the different questions – “what, who or what’s” – suggests a feeling of uncertainty.

Blythe does not just show characters being fearful in the play, but also her own proximity to violence. She asks a fellow bystander “where do you think the fighting is now? Up there?” and then suggests she will move closer towards it: “I’m gonna look too, / thank you, bye” (16). A ‘Shocked Man’ shows Alecky photos on his phone and describes violent

events: “[t]hey’re burning cars, they’re looting they’re burning, well, they went into shops ‘n’ they’ve take shit outta shops. [...] There’s people trapped in that house I think” (21). His use of the word ‘they’ is othering and creates a divide between the looters and the rest of society. These moments – and the presence of Blythe on stage – further reveal random human vulnerability to the Other.

The violence that Alecky and the bystanders describe in the script is supported by stage directions which suggest a dangerous situation: “[h]elicopter flies overhead” (21), “[s]irens” (15), “[l]ooting continues in haste in the background” (29), “[d]ozens of mounted police come past and head up towards the epicentre of the riot” (16). In the Almeida’s production, many of these were created as sound effects by the sound designer Paul Arditti. Alecky’s reaction to some of these, such as saying “oh my God, oh my God that’s pretty exciting” when the “*mounted police come past*” serves to heighten the tension (16). Although the epicentre of the violence is never explicitly re-enacted onstage, it is unambiguous that Alecky is very close to a dangerous and unpredictable event. Her proximity to danger is heightened as several characters tell Alecky to “be careful”, implying she is at risk of danger. Welder John says “I dun nowhere else it’s spreading to but BE CAREFUL” (15), and Shocked Man warns the same, “go from the back and you’ll see it. And be careful” (21). It is perplexing that some critics derided the play for not containing enough menace and threat, when it is evident from these examples the play is punctuated by proximity to threat and danger. Further, it is almost voyeuristic of the critics to demand menace from a play about the riots, although these demands are not unlike Blythe’s own voyeuristic behaviour in researching the show, which the play reveals: “LOOK AT THE CAR wow that’s amazing gotta get that photo. Amazing” (29). In other places Blythe highlights the voyeuristic nature of her quest, such as when she includes lines by Sam as he troubles over his position as a bystander: “I genuinely don’t know whether I should be here or not. / I don’t know if I’m adding to the uh... chaos or not. // Just voyeurism isn’t it, it’s natural”. “He hah. Yeah. Ha hah”, Blythe replies, “[i]t is” (28).

These examples of characters’ anxiety and proximity to violence demonstrate that most of the people caught up in the riots experienced precarity. Their daily routine, normality and reality were altered. In the play, this shattering of reality is clear in two ways – disruption to the objective practicalities of life, and disruption to subjective experience. For example, several characters complain about the disruption to their planned activities and daily routines. Ian bemoans “I was supposed to be decorating at my house, I haven’t done single thing this week” (24); Romanian Man complains “I-I want to buy one pack of cigarette but all the-the

shops is closed so I dunno where...” (15); and Sam wants to check on the lawns he tends to: “I’ve gotta, I-I-I’ve manage the gardens just on a square so I just wanted to check them, they they-they’re okay” (28). The practical disruption to everyday life aligns with precarity as understood by Butler, and in the previous chapter this was apparent in *An Oak Tree* through the Hypnotist and Father’s inability to function as before.

Other characters describe how the unprecedented events altered their reality in a more metaphysical way – expectations of life continuing as normal were shattered. Father Rob describes the night of riots as “extraordinary”, indicating that the events were unique and altered the familiar world (17). Tony nostalgically considers his position a week earlier and ungrammatically suggests the riots would have been beyond everyone’s imaginations at that point: “I don’t any of us would have imagine ourselves at this point a week ago” (24). Siva, whose shop has been ransacked, also describes with nostalgia how the riots were considered beyond belief: “[y]ou just never thought you’d have to, never happen to you, it-it’s to say when you-you live in London you never thought these kind of riots come to you” (40). It is clear that, for some characters, the sense of precarity generated by the riots has disarranged their sense of the real. One of the clearest examples of this is at the start of Scene 4, ‘Steering Group Part B’, where Ian describes how the riots have made him actually question reality:

IAN. Tha – you know for me, you know, there were a lot of people just watching who shouldn’t have been there –

TONY. Yeah.

IAN. – it was like a media e... for me – it was almost – certainly Mare Street – it was almost like a media event. / I-I had a slight, coupla clicks a coupla times, you know like you so think, what’s reality here, is this actually sort of like actually a film thing that’s going on here? You know that these are all – actors, they’re not real people.

JANE. / Mhmm. Mmm. (24)

This destabilisation of reality and his comment that people are “actors, they’re not real people” of course takes on metatheatrical significance when repeated within the framing of the play: the dramatic irony of this line serves to remind an audience that the people on stage *are* actors, and are not the real people they represent.

As detailed in Chapter Two, Butler describes how precarity exposes “the necessary dimensions of our interdependency” (in Puar 148) and that the “extreme precariousness of the other” makes ethical demands upon people which they cannot refuse. In *Little Revolution*, this

interdependency is revealed not only through Blythe and others being vulnerable to injury and danger throughout the riots, but also through the feeling of increased ethical responsibility towards the Other that the riots has generated. This feeling of responsibility is shared from both ‘sides’ of the community (the Clarence Road middle class residents, and the Pembury estate residents) – however, they have different targets. The Clarence Road residents set up the “Friends of Siva” campaign to help raise money to support the shopkeeper Siva and refurbish his ransacked shop, and the key event of this campaign is a Marks and Spencer’s sponsored tea-party to celebrate the reopening of the shop. Kate and Sadie from the Pembury Estate set up a “Stop Criminalising Hackney Youth” campaign in order to petition for more lenience to be shown by the police to young people in the area. These campaigns again show the “active” relationship between societal and existential precarity (Butler in Puar 169): for the characters, personal vulnerability caused by the riots (an event caused by social precarity) produces an ethical desire to help the Other.

In Chapter Two, I also introduced Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism which dictates that “a political project” that “promises to induce in you a new way of being” becomes cruel “when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it in the first place” (Berlant 1). The Marks and Spencer’s tea party is planned as a “massive community opening party” (32) intended “to get the community back together” (77); and, when reopening the shop, Ian describes the fundraising achievement as “human beings responding to other human beings in need of love and care [...] it’s a sharing together [...] and this is just the start” (92-92). Blythe juxtaposes these hopeful communitarian comments about the party and Save Siva campaign with remarks from Pembury estate residents that suggest the tea-party will not provide the community-building it intends. Sadie, in particular, has doubts about the tea-party, which she describes as being run by “the same people with the brooms / who came down to sweep up symbolically and wave brooms around – and the Save Siva campaign” (55). For Sadie, the party is a symbol of change, rather than change itself: “[y]ou can’t smooth over inequality. You can’t say, let’s meet in-in a street party and talk about the fact that, you’know... you’re-you’re living in quarter-of-a-million-pound houses and uh, y’know, we’re struggling to pay our rents” (67). She tells Ian there were “other voices” who did not agree with the street party, and he concedes the “middle class professional people have realised they might need to do something more” (88). A German reporter at the party also voices the view that it did not meet its aims:

Well that was impressive but I don't think they did it just for uh for uh for the community, they did it uh for PR reasons [...] it's still uh lovely that everybody came together on the street but people I talked to, uhm, from-from Pembury, they were very suspicious. Uh and either they carried away muffins to their homes so they wouldn't stay here and didn't dr-um drink tea with – with the other people... (86)

Blythe highlights the failure of the street party to meet its community-healing aims, but contrasts this with the Pembury estate campaign, which also appears to be flagging: “the piece very specifically charts two different post-riot campaigns” (Haydon). The campaign was started by Kate and Sadie, mothers of the young disenfranchised people of the estate “because right now, up until now there hasn't been a voice” (54). However, immediately Sadie worries that “last week's meeting was quite small”, “there's still loads to do” and she is disheartened by the interest in her projects: “I've got tickets an' hardly anybody has, committed to coming on that / coach” (74). Although Kate, a fellow campaigner, tells Sadie “it's about solidarity isn't it Sadie” (75), Sadie appears lonely as the community fails to support her campaign and, in response, she becomes disenchanted with the project herself: “[t]o be honest I've got better things to do [...] if nobody's interested then I'm not interested either because there's no point” (77). The political project is revealed to be cruelly optimistic: what is intended to improve Sadie's life (and benefit the wider community) is revealed to cause her unhappiness – yet Sadie continues to optimistically attach herself to the promise of what the campaign might eventually provide.

I have made the case that Blythe reveals that, once reality is destabilised for characters, they optimistically attach themselves to projects in order to fill the vulnerable gap created by precarity. However, her juxtaposition of hopefulness and disenchantment suggests the community projects are cruelly nostalgic placeholders for a perceived lost reality, which may only work to be “profoundly confirming” in the short-term, as Berlant describes (2).

4.10.2 *Little Revolution and societal precarity: content*

In *Little Revolution*, the middle-class characters seem especially shocked by the violence they witness. Other characters – many of them working class – are less dismayed by the violence, and consider it an inevitability of the ongoing precarity generated by neoliberal structures and laws. For example, ‘Hindrey Road Mum’ considers the riots did not start because of the shooting of Mark Duggan, but were, instead, part of an ongoing socio-political attrition by police against local residents:

People said, 'Why it started is because the guy get shoot.' It's not only that. It started Thursday of last week. Police park right up at the end of the road and they give out flyers said dey gonna raid de houses. And dey raid de houses. [...] I told the police, instead you develop relationship with de people you are 'arassin' de people. (27)

Imogen Tyler's analysis of the riots confirms the opinion of the Hindrey Road Mum character and indicates that one of the central reasons for people to riot was anger at police behaviour. Drawing on a *Guardian*-LSE research project 'Reading the Riots', Tyler notes "it was the intrusive and excessive penal activities of the state which many rioters were expressing their anger about. In particular, the rioters were perceived as an opportunity for revenge on the police" (196) and there "was an overwhelming resentment among the rioters that the police subjected them to unwarranted suspicion and invasive surveillance" (197). Several characters in the play attest to poor treatment of young people by the police. Kate says "[m]y son comes out of his house 'n' he's stopped and searched just because he happens to be there, he's mixed-race and he happens to be there" (49); Kyle states "[w]e just don't like the police innit, they've been moulding us for too long innit" (49), and, when describing a stop and search encounter, Jerome says "I felt like I've had my pride ripped outta me then-that day 'n' ever since I've I've had a different view to the police" (50). In the play, Kate and Sadie's campaign is an attempt to retaliate against this type of police behaviour, but it does not appear to garner much success. Indeed, in reality, punishment for the rioters was very severe. Guy Standing argues that the courts behaved impartially and "[s]entences were absurdly out of proportion to the severity of the crimes supposedly committed – for example, six months in jail for taking a £3.50 bottle of water – and summary justice was administered through hastily convened courts" (*The Precariat Charter* 228-229). Tyler suggests that harsh punishments were given because of the feeling of precariousness that the riots produced, arguing that the "media spectacle of the riots understandably generated fear in the public, a fear which in turn enables the state to garner public support for the suspension of juridical norms and deployment of exceptional punitive measures" (195). In this way, Tyler reveals how precarity is both created by state behaviour, and helps to sustain it, with a large portion of the blame lying with mediating agencies who work "to orchestrate public opinion by transforming these events into a 'moral panic'. [...] Indeed in the case of the riots, their cause was identified immediately as a moral deficiency" (195). However, as Blythe's play exposes, there were plenty of other reasons for the riots, aside from 'moral deficiency'.

A wide range of other reasons for the riots are also given by other characters, most of which concern inequality and a lack of opportunity: “there’s no youth centre” (51), “it’s their fault” (the police) (21), “it’s a young people’s revolution” (47), “them youngsters like to get their views across” (48), “[t]here’s nothing to do” (48), “it’s their culture” (48), “young people [...] had real political sorts of reasons for being involved as in the way they conceive themselves in society, the-the way they feel the police treat them” (49), “[r]ace is a hundred per cent a part of it” (49), “parents can’t be bovered” (51), “a dispersal zone” (52), “youth service has been massively cut. EMA’s been cut and it’s no wonder the riots happened” (53). For Tyler, the rioters focus on “[s]mashing up shops and looting goods was for many an expression of social inequality in a society in which the ability to work and consume are primary markers of social belonging” (200). The negative effect of considering human beings as merely consumers and labourers is something that my next case study, Kim Noble, focuses on in his work. In *Little Revolution*, the characters’ descriptions of reduced economic opportunities and maltreatment by the state indicates a collapsing of social security and the “shifting up of economic precarity” (191) that Lauren Berlant articulates – the condition of people from more classes entering a “precarious public sphere” (Berlant 3). Interestingly, Tyler suggests that the riots also produced a new form of ‘class’, because “rioters came from a broad range of ethnicities, even putting aside existing tensions between different groups during the riots, temporarily consisting a new class” and arguing that the events were “an opportunity for young people to be together in a public space, a form of massing now virtually criminalized, and to cast off temporarily the divisions between them” (203). With little else to put their hope in, rioters put their hope in violence and riots as a desperate way to effect change, and, as Tyler contends, “‘unity’ was frequently cited in the interviews with rioters, who experienced events as a new form of collectivity” (203).

Berlant argues cruel optimism “tracks precarity in terms of the desperation and violence that have been released when the capitalist ‘good life’ fantasy no longer has anything to which to attach its promises of flourishing” (in Puar 171). Certainly, in focusing on the riots, *Little Revolution* captures the moment in which “desperation and violence” are released, which characters blame on institutional racism, and an unequal distribution of power between the state and the public. However, it is important to recognise that, although the riots are a singular event that highlight and reinforce precarity, the characters themselves suggest this precarity has been ongoing for some time – “there is no money out here, there’s nuffing for them to do” (51) – and this aligns with “precaritization as an ongoing process” (Butler in Puar 169), as understood by Berlant, Lorey and Puar (see Chapter 2). Whilst the singular event of

the riot increased and highlighted precarity, the precarious has clearly been a condition of the everyday for the Hackney community. Indeed, the riot itself was a reaction to this ongoing precarious situation young and black people faced within the community. Blythe describes how the political aspirations of the violence in reaction to this were also cruelly optimistic – the “revolution” was not as transformative as hoped, which is where the play’s title derives from:

The title comes from something that Colin, who has the barber shop on Clarence Road, said to me. He described what happened as a ‘mini-revolution’. Actually, nothing much has changed, so there truly has been little revolution in Hackney. (Blythe, ‘Alecky Blythe: It Looked...’)

Although the riots did not effect lasting change for the rioters, it offered them another way to react against their ongoing precariousness. As Tyler argues, with reference to Berlant, a high percentage of young people in Britain are NEETS (not in education, employment or training) and this “represents about one million young people for whom everyday life is shaped by a crisis of possibility – the idea of a future in which their ability to participate actively in the social life of the state is radically uncertain (Berlant 2011)” (198). For these people, their actions were “a specific response to increasing inequalities of opportunity [...] and rising youth unemployment” (198). Through *Little Revolution*, Blythe goes some way to staging the precarious lives of these young people that Tyler describes, although they appear only intermittently throughout the play. Unfortunately, the precarious situation that exacerbated the riots continued for these young people and their communities, and indeed, the riots were used as a reason to continue with damaging policies, as Guy Standing notes: “[a]fter the riots of August 2011, the British Prime Minister justified drawing up plans to intervene more in family life [...] He went on to support evicting people from social housing, while the Work and Pensions Secretary of State advocated cutting the benefits of those participating in anti-social activity” (*The Precariat Charter* 228).

I will now investigate how the precarity Blythe reveals through *Little Revolution* – both existential and societal – is also mirrored in the form of the play, in order to increase an embodied understanding of precarity for the audience.

4.10.3 *Little Revolution and precarity: form*

The feeling of precarity the characters describe is mirrored in the form of the play too. There are 51 scenes in total and some are very short, such as Scene 11, titled ‘Not That Smart’,

which features a short monologue from the character Deanne. The other short snippets and snatches of conversation create the impression of zooming in and out of people's lives. The form of using many short scenes in a play creates a very specific effect. There is no time for an audience to become absorbed in characters, or reflective – the focus is on fast-paced action and constantly severing the relationship with an audience through continual shifts in scene, mood and lighting which encourages a distance from the storyline, as though the audience are flicking through the 'top hits' of the riots on a television screen. The characters in the play highlight the fast-paced and confusing nature of the riots that the play's structure epitomises. Ian states that events "are happening very very quickly" and Father Rob says "it's been a very hectic um week" (20). Further, the quick pace of the fragmented scenes, and choosing to begin several in media res, allows the audience a flavour of the pace and tension Blythe appears to experience when trying to seek out interesting instances around Hackney for her play. Rebellato suggests the play "gives us a sense of what it is like being caught up in a confusing and sprawling ongoing mess like a riot" ('Kant. Complexity...'). Indeed, in the final scene of the play, Blythe bursts "*in loudly, out of breath*" to a barber shop, offering the impression that gathering material is a constant, fast-paced activity (95).

The form of Blythe's play offers the audience an embodied understanding of the confusion of the riots the characters experience. The short pithy scenes which jump around in time and space are emblematic of what the scholar and playwright Sarah Grochala recognises as contemporary theatre's new propensity for "liquid dramaturgies" (220) which respond to the "need to find new cultural structures through which to articulate [...] shifts in everyday lived experience" created by neoliberalism (81). According to Grochala, liquid dramaturgies "produce dramatic structures which attempt to capture more effectively the increasingly liquid nature under the pressures of global financial capitalism" (220). Although *Little Revolution* does follow several plot-lines in chronological order, the play is perpetuated by disjointed short street scenes and monologues that feature characters who appear once and never again, which mirrors the "liquid" dramaturgy Grochala examines. As Susannah Clapp reviewed, "[i]t's a fragmentary show about a society that has been blown into fragments" (*The Observer*).

The confusion *Little Revolution* generates through form was mirrored by the staging at the Almeida Theatre, as the space was reconfigured into a theatre-in-the-round setting: "[s]ee the Almeida's space transformed as the audience are placed at the heart of the action" (Almeida website). Placing the audience "at the heart of the action", aligns them with Blythe's experience "[i]n the middle of this riot, in the middle of Hackney" (Trueman). While

the audience are not, of course, physically placed in the middle of the stage, at the actual “heart” of the action, being configured in the round and voyeuristically looking in on the action from all sides does offer them a viewpoint similar to Blythe’s during her research. Aligning them with Blythe’s perspective intensifies their experience: it is almost as if the audience are inside the dictaphone itself, playing back the recordings of the riot. By dismantling the traditional ‘end-on’ playing space, and bringing the audience physically closer to the stage action, Hill-Gibbins encourages the audience to embody a feeling of instability, increasing understanding of the precarity the characters experience. Further, for the majority of the performance the audience remain lit – it is not intended they sit back and passively absorb the play, but are encouraged to remain aware of each other and feel part of the action. Hill-Gibbins uses space to create presence in proximity between the audience and the actors and this encourages the notion of what Gotthold Ephraim Lessing terms “physical unity” (Lessing in Grochala 69). Grochala explains that “physical unity sees dramatic time and space as commensurate with lived time and space if the spatio-temporal structures of a play reflect the audience lived experience of time and space during its performance” (68). Although the audience does not share time with the characters on stage as discussed, and the locations do move around, the attempt to redistribute the auditorium space encourages the audience to ‘move’ *with* the locations, to experience the play as if they share the actors’ space – and therefore, share in their precarious feelings.

4.10.4 *Post-traumatic English kitsch theatre: Little Revolution and cruel optimism/nostalgia*

In writing several plays about how English communities respond to precarity, Blythe has developed a form of theatre I term ‘post-traumatic English kitsch theatre’. This next section uncovers what I mean by this and analyses the attributes of this form of theatre.

Many of the plays Blythe writes are ‘post-traumatic’, for while she often records trauma as it occurs – such as in *Come Out Eli*, *Little Revolution*, and *London Road* – the main focus of these plays is to document the aftermath of the trauma, the ‘clean up’ operations, and how communities respond in an attempt to reunite and heal themselves. Like all categorical words, ‘kitsch’ is a word that is hard to define. For the purposes of this thesis, I understand kitsch to mean objects and activities that are considered low-art: something not unique that many people view as cheap, tacky and sentimental. Something that is kitsch is likely to be ubiquitous and will appeal to conventional mass taste.

I consider ‘post-traumatic kitsch syndrome’ to describe a kitsch response to an incident of trauma. For example, the tea-party held in *Little Revolution*, in which Jane dispels anxieties about the party’s success by musing that “[t]here’ll be Marks and Spencer’s cakes, everything’ll be fine” (69) highlights the stereotypical English opinion that tea and cake solve all problems. Following the party, despite its success, Ian admits it was “[n]aff” (88) and Christoph describes the Pembury residents as complaining “we don’t need muffins to be given to, we’re not uh...*starving* here” (86). These humorous comments reveal the conflict between the trauma experienced and the community’s kitsch response, which was also highlighted in the image used for the Almeida’s poster design.

The main image used in the press and marketing of *Little Revolution*, and printed on the cover of the play text published by Nick Hern Books, is an image of a red brick smashing into a red mug, on a white background. There is liquid exploding from the smashed mug, which appears to be tea with milk. NB Studios, the design company who created the image, describe on a blog the difficulty of working with “a complex and challenging narrative” which must be “reduce[d] down into a single image that has a very broad appeal”. NB Studios explains “we hit upon the idea of smashing a mug with a brick. The brick throwing is a nice nod to the theme of rioting, and the overall scene has a feeling of drama and tension” (‘Making a Little Revolution’). The mug chosen for the final image, was a red ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ mug. On the mug, the ubiquitous words ‘KEEP CALM AND’ are visible, and it can be presumed ‘CARRY ON’ are the two incomplete words, as the letters ‘RY’ are also visible. These words are printed under half of what appears to be the image of a Tudor crown.



Fig. 2. Image used in the marketing for *Little Revolution* at the Almeida Theatre, by NB Studios. Photo by Bruno Drummond.

This image articulates the idea of post-traumatic kitsch. The ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ slogan was developed for a poster designed by the British government before World War II, intended to promote British stoicism throughout the coming years. In 2001, Stuart and Mary Manley, the owners of a small bookshop in the North of England, discovered the poster amongst their possessions. Since their discovery, the ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ slogan has become popularised and imitations and humorous rip-offs are ubiquitous. Some of these imitations are developed to be printed on cheap sellable items, others are used for more overtly political or commercial reasons. Mary Manley claims the mass production of the slogan was not her intention: “I didn’t want it trivialised, but now of course it’s been trivialised beyond belief” (Manley in Chu). Manley describes how the ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ mug is now a kitsch item, and one now permanently connected with Britishness, that reflects, as Hatherley argues, “a conservative longing for security and stability in the face of hard times” (18).

The English are stereotypically renowned for liking tea-drinking, and street-parties are a particularly English activity often planned to coincide with patriotic and nostalgic events, such as royal events. In Chapter Two I outlined the connection between precarity and nostalgia, which Su argues is always a reaction to “how present systems of social relations fail to address human needs” (26). The image marketed by the Almeida suggests that precarity (the brick) and kitsch nostalgia (the mug), are connected, and indeed I argue the tea-party in *Little Revolution* exemplifies what Eaglestone describes as “cruel nostalgia” (96) – a sentimental English attachment to the nostalgic past in order to alleviate the frustrations of the present social condition, Blitz spirit in the face of tragedy. Simon Stephens draws attention to the English focus of Blythe’s work, when he tells her “there’s something very English about your work” and that it depicts “the edges of England in some way”; and Blythe agrees, “yes, there’s something, I don’t know what that is”.

London Road is another clear example of post-traumatic English kitsch theatre and it is worth briefly referencing. A verbatim musical, this important piece was inspired by the murders of five sex workers in Ipswich, Suffolk, in late 2006.⁶⁹ When the production was

⁶⁹ *London Road* was the first of Blythe’s productions that did not utilise the recorded delivery technique to its full extent. At an “In Context” panel event at the National Theatre, Blythe described how the National Theatre agreed to produce the show on the understanding the earphones would not be used in performance and that the

announced it generated initial scepticism for several reasons: whether this was an appropriate topic for a musical, and whether it should be produced so soon after the traumatic events. The story concentrates on the residents of London Road in Ipswich, and how they cope with media attention following the revelation that the convicted murderer – Stephen Wright – lived on London Road. Blythe interviewed many of the residents on the road throughout an extended period (both before, during and after the arrest of Wright) and used these testimonies to create the script, which focuses on how, as the characters of Julie and Gordon say in the first scene, “the murders have brought the community together” and “restarted the neighbourhood” (6).

The thematic concern of the musical is how the residents try to rebuild their community in the aftermath of the trauma, and their response to the tragedy is to engage in kitsch projects: setting up a Neighbourhood Watch, starting resident AGM meetings, planning local social events such as a Christmas party, and organising a ‘London Road in Bloom’ flower competition. These activities are quaint, and English, and unmistakably kitsch nostalgia intended to recuperate a London Road that has been ‘lost’, as the character of Julie describes:

As far as I’m concerned ya know – it all got – all got to normal now. Ya know back t-back to normal the way – the way it was. Ya know. We just wanna – wanna see an end – end to it and London Road getting back to being London Road instead of being known for somewhere where – where the murderer lived. (72)

What Julie, and *London Road*, reflects is the ‘structure of feeling’ of a nostalgic aesthetic of struggle that Hatherley argues has made a re-turn to public life, “Austerity Nostalgia” in the face of neoliberal precarity (8). However, despite residents’ highlighting the interdependency the precarity has created and claiming their group has “become so much more than a Neighbourhood Watch, really it’s become a real (Beat.) residents’/ association-come-community” (73), beneath the surface, the play suggests that these projects are a temporary measure and trauma will be ongoing. The character of Graham states “I think we’ve been scarred (Beat.) for ever. [...] Ya know (Beat.) people ’ave been (Pause.) yeah – affected by this ’an I guess they always will” (65). Billington’s review similarly highlights the underlying unhappiness that the kitsch nostalgia masks:

instantly we are into that world of tea-and-biscuits and localised do-gooding rarely captured on the British stage. The focus, in fact, is less on the killings themselves than

actors would learn the words. Blythe felt this was “a departure from the purer verbatim form of my past endeavours” (Blythe, *London Road* vi).

on a community's attempt to reconstitute itself through floral competitions and quiz nights. But, while the show celebrates the healing process, it also raises disturbing questions about the dark underside of bourgeois togetherness. You wonder why it took so long for the authorities to address the local connection between drugs and prostitution. And, for all the civic activity after the trauma, you sense a lingering relief that a social problem has been brutally solved.

Billington's review acutely describes how the residents' kitsch response to precarity masks the failure of neoliberal projects and structures to support the wide spectrum of society. As Tyler argues, "[w]hat the riots exposed is that the consensus for austerity was founded on an increasingly unstable base" (205). Post-traumatic kitsch nostalgia is a way for communities to sustain themselves during unprecedented events, but ultimately the threads that bind the notion of societal "togetherness" are thin, and the myth of community is always close to fraying.

4.10.5 *Verbatim theatre as cruel optimism*

In exploring communities that engage in post-traumatic kitsch activities following trauma, Blythe – unknowingly – offers a self-reflexive condemnation of verbatim theatre's political project. The marketing rhetoric of verbatim theatre often focuses on the ability of the verbatim project to affect change in the outside world. For example, in interviews about Tanika Gupta's *Gladiator Games*, Kerry Michael, then Artistic Director of Theatre Royal Stratford East, writes that the second run of the play in Sheffield "will enable even more people to bear witness to the Mubarek family's story" and that "this production can be a catalyst for debate, and more importantly, change" (Michael in Gupta 3). Whilst Blythe's productions are not overtly marketed as catalysts for cathartic and political change, this is certainly a claim of other theatre of the real productions and verbatim theatre as a response to precarity requires attention. In this next section I show that the narrative of the middle-class residents attempting to save Siva's shop offered Blythe a powerful deconstructive way to highlight that verbatim theatre is also a political project that is part of the structure of cruel optimism.

The focus on the middle classes offers *Little Revolution* a form of theatrical self-reflexivity. The play can be read allegorically – it treats its main subject under the guise of another by providing an analysis of the complexities of verbatim theatre through the narrative of the shop. The theatre, as institution, has the potential to be a societal point of intersection between disparate communities. At the time of the production of *Little Revolution*, the

Almeida Theatre demonstrated they were a place that fuses different communities together, through the use of the community chorus. The Almeida's decision to cast these young people was not purely economical, or creative, but also an attempt to draw a wider audience. Blythe states that the Almeida saw the casting of a community chorus as a way to encourage more of a mixed audience to attend the theatre, and prices were dropped to reflect this ('Making Verbatim Theatre').⁷⁰ Blythe suggests the conjunction of the community chorus and professional actors embodies the idea of community that the play explores: "you've got people from a wide variety of backgrounds coming together which reflects a central theme within the piece" ('Interview with Alecky Blythe' 8). Similarly, in *Little Revolution*, Siva's shop is described by Ian as a place at the intersection of the community: "[i]t's clear this is more than a shop, as shops so often are, it's a bridge between communities here" (92), a sentiment which Sarah also echoes when she says "what I think is brilliant about Siva here is he is a person at the centre of a community and he knows both rich and / poor and that's why he's an important symbol and he is basically the person who is // crossing those divides already" (32). The Almeida theatre actively reflects itself to be like Siva's shop: a place where different classes of people can gather. Both the shop and the Almeida Theatre are central nexuses where the idea of 'community' is magnified.

The use of the community chorus to represent the rioters was a central debate amongst critics. Some critics, such as Andrzej Lukowski, view this chorus as essential to the piece: "a huge corps of outreach programme-sourced amateur actors who fill the theatre with dynamic motion and a sense of living, breathing community". Further, he considers the chorus to represent "a symbol of hope. We fucked up – but maybe they won't". The use of "we" here is problematic and it is uncertain who Lukowski means by this – presumably the middle class patrons of the Almeida watching a play "that rather cold-bloodedly skewers the middle classes of Hackney". However, other critics are less positive about Hill-Gibbins' use of the chorus. Pringle labels them "genuinely problematic", especially as he deduces that, as they are labeled 'volunteers', they will not have been paid.⁷¹ When the chorus are used to represent the rioters he considers it to be "uniformly successful as hypocrisy" because "it seems the 'community' Blythe and Hill-Gibbins have constructed is as divided as the newly gentrified streets of Hackney that proved a tinderbox for the rage and disenchantment of the

⁷⁰ In the *Little Revolution* archive held at the Almeida Theatre, the document titled 'Little Revolution Community Chorus Useful Information to Know' details that for the show there is a "New Bookers ticket deal" – only £5 if you have never booked an Almeida show before.

⁷¹ Documentation in the *Little Revolution* archive implies that they were unpaid, but given £5 a day for travel expenses.

dispossessed". For Pringle, Hill Gibbins' directorial choices for the production enact what the text of the play claims to highlight and critique (the failure of the middle classes to allow the working classes a voice). Others take a balanced approach to the community chorus, such as Rebellato who points out "no one's forced to be in the community chorus and it may well be genuinely a valuable, invigorating experience"; however he also suggests that "it sure does add to the sense of division in the theatre, the sense of our middle-class omniscience as a theatre audience, demanding to be shown the reality of the underclass, is disrupted, broken, inadequate". In a rather idealistic way, Trueman considers that merely by virtue of being on stage the community chorus "cannot be those that they represent. They've had contact and accepted the institution's terms. They have a voice. They can be seen by an audience". Trueman assumes a conflation between the community chorus and the rioters, arguing they cannot "be" them, because of their codification within the theatrical institution. This is confusing as this suggestion has not been explicitly made – even the critics who found the community chorus problematic do not suggest that the young people on stage are actually those they represent, merely that their unpaid labour highlights the divide the play explores. Further, his claim "[t]hey have a voice" is rhetorically confusing and highlights the multiple meanings of 'voice'. What does Trueman mean by 'voice' – spoken lines in the play (of which they actually have few), or the political agency that being part of this theatre production provides? The debate between the critics about the ethics of using the community chorus uncovers the cultural hegemony that the play unmasks: *Little Revolution* is a convincing articulation of how the middle class speaks for the working class, and in doing so they take away the working class' unmediated voice. Young people are given an opportunity to act on a professional stage, but they are unpaid volunteers and the middle-class writer, actors and producers of the play creatively and economically benefit from their presence.

The erasure of the working-class voice by the middle-classes is a feature of the dialogue in the play and through using the shop as metaphorical allegory, Blythe stages the complex nature of hierarchies within theatre and cultural representation. This is explored through a focus on voice and self-expression. Siva is a less proficient user of the English language than the middle-class people who try to support him. He appears unable to adequately express himself: "I feel very good / y'know, ve- I can't express myself y'know. That day I was cried" (79). His jumbled words are, of course, a feature of verbatim, but also indicate his broken English and difficulty in expressing his subjective experience. The middle-class residents are shown to speak on behalf of Siva in the community, and the media. Even though Siva is the "focal point of this" (24), the first time he appears in the play he is

not even able to introduce himself because Sarah (a middle class resident) does so on his behalf: “[t]his is Siva, everyone knows Siva” (24). This is compelling because the character who is the main focus of the action in the play is largely silent, relying on others to vocalise him. The residents even ascribe emotions to Siva, dictating how he should feel: Tony – “I mean you’re being sent from one emotion to another” (24), “he’s basically... exhausted. // He looks exhausted doesn’t he?” (32). Despite the residents claiming they recognise Siva’s emotions and exhaustion, the play is peppered with instances where they pressure him to take action he seems unwilling to enter, such as appearing on national television:

JANE. J- But sorry just to go back to these, / so in terms of the, y’know *This Morning* and whoever else, are we, we’re just saying – we’re saying no to those are we?

Pause.

SIVA. Yesssss.

IAN. You, do you *don’t* want to do *This Morning*?

SIVA (*very quietly*). No. (42)

Despite Siva’s protestations “[n]ah if-if-if” (45), Ian asks “can we insist” and Jane admonishes Siva for his reservations (“this isn’t just about you without being / putting...”) despite the fact that the group was set up specifically to support Siva in the first place. Blythe’s presence throughout these exchanges as another middle-class person aligns her with their pushy position.⁷² Blythe suggests to Megson that it was not her “intention to be a character in it”, but that Rupert Goold (Artistic Director of the Almeida Theatre), thought it could act as a metaphorical device (Megson 229). He made the analogous leap that Blythe’s middle-class voyeuristic presence at the riots was akin to middle-class theatregoers watching a play about the riots:

Rupert drew the analogy with middle-class curiosity with what was going on [...] the analogy with theatre being a middle-class occupation: in the act of the theatre putting

⁷² Blythe admits that during research the voices she could most easily access were people of a similar class and concedes several protagonists are middle class people because they were “the people [she] found it easier to have connections with” (‘Making Verbatim Theatre’ panel). Interestingly, the *Little Revolution* archive at the Almeida implies that Blythe attempts to minimise this problem through the way she dresses when conducting research. The ‘costume plan’ for the character of Alecky notes “[d]o we go with her ‘Bling Girl’ look which she wears to do the interviews?? This feels to be Alecky’s preference but I wonder if this is because she’s not sure about looking like she belongs to a different tribe which I think is really interesting...” This suggests that Blythe adapts her appearance when interviewing people in order to appear more approachable and maximize her potential of capturing a wide variety of voices.

the play on about the riots, I was representing that in the part that I was playing as a bystander. (Blythe in Megson 229)

In this way, the character of Alecky becomes a deconstructive tool for analysing the ethics and practice of verbatim, from within the practice itself. Dan Rebellato writes that the play “lays bare the method” (‘Kant, Complexity...’) and Matt Trueman that *Little Revolution*’s “brilliance lies precisely in the way it wrings meaning out of its own failures: both Blythe’s failures in the field and theatre’s (inevitable) failure to represent the riots. In this, *Little Revolution* becomes its own metaphor”.

4.11 Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed the recorded delivery technique and the verbatim play *Little Revolution*. In doing so I have demonstrated that Blythe considers the voice to be a route to the real, which she accesses through using the indexical traces of archive, presence and technology, all of which coalesce together to reify the voice. I revealed how Blythe’s work has been developed from documentary theatre of the past, and that she is interested in exploring not what the real is, but how it is constituted: not just “*what* people say but *how* they say it” (Blythe in Megson 224, my emphasis). Furthermore, I used the work of Butler and Berlant to show how the indexical traces in *Little Revolution* are used to explore precarity in both content and form, and that this precarity is also created affectively for an audience. I illustrated that Blythe has created what I term ‘post-traumatic English kitsch theatre’, a genre of theatre that articulates the sentimental English nostalgic response to tragic and precarious events. This revealed that, in response to the instability of reality and subjective experience that precarity causes, people have a propensity to substitute nostalgic kitsch into the gap left behind. Blythe’s exploration of these events also extends to her own verbatim work, which self-reflexively deconstructs the practice from within the practice itself: by highlighting the middle-class failure to unite the community and allow the working class a voice, Blythe suggests verbatim theatre may be a cruelly optimistic political project which practitioners attach themselves to without due regard.

CHAPTER FIVE

REPLAYING THE REAL: KIM NOBLE'S *YOU'RE NOT ALONE*

“Everything goes, everything ends, you can't keep hold of anything.”

– Kim Noble, *You're Not Alone*

5.1 Introduction

The last two chapters analysed the theatrical work of Tim Crouch and Alecky Blythe evincing how, for them, indexical traces of the real are both evidence of and a response to contemporary precarity. This final chapter considers the performance practice of Kim Noble in the same way, highlighting how his work overlaps with Blythe's and Crouch's. The case study production is Noble's *You're Not Alone* (first performed at the Traverse Theatre in 2014), and I explain its significance as an example of Martin's theatre of the real, and of the extradiegetic real in contemporary theatre. As there are no published texts of Noble's performances, this chapter requires detailed performance analysis of *You're Not Alone*, which takes into account the four times I saw the production across 2015 – 2016.⁷³

In *You're Not Alone* Noble uses the archive, presence, and technology as indexical traces of the real. For Noble, technology is the key site of the real: it dominates his performance, but is symbiotically supported by his use of the archive and presence. In this chapter I contend that, like Crouch and Blythe, Noble uses indexical traces of the real to stage and interrogate contemporary precarity, and through engaging in a variety of projects which undermine neoliberal structures, Noble also draws attention to the ongoing precariousness of everyday life. *You're Not Alone* demonstrates the interconnectedness of both personal and political precarity, as understood by Judith Butler and Lauren Berlant, outlined in Chapter Two. In content and form, *You're Not Alone* works to demonstrate how precarity alters the experience of reality.

Noble's work is distinctive from Crouch and Blythe's in several ways. Firstly, his theatrical projects could not be described as plays, in the traditional sense – they are

⁷³All quotations from *You're Not Alone* throughout this chapter are taken from notes made during these performances.

performance.⁷⁴ Secondly, Noble's work is highly comedic and although not presented as stand-up comedy in the style of comedians like Stewart Lee, for example, it contains the hallmarks of comedy performance, such as direct address, and the use of jokes and satire. Noble's performance practice has been routinely supported and produced by the Soho Theatre, one of London's foremost venues for new comedy and cabaret acts, and Steve Lock, the Comedy Producer there, has personally championed Noble. Any humour in Crouch and Blythe's plays arises indirectly from the characters' situations, whereas Noble elicits direct laughter as a response from his audience.

Despite occupying a different theatrical genre to Crouch and Blythe, Noble shares similar dramaturgical processes with them. In common with Blythe's work, Noble uses technology as an important route to the real. Like Crouch and Blythe, Noble performs in his own work. As Noble uses autobiographical material, his work can be classified within Carol Martin's "theatre of the real" definition as "autobiographical theatre" (*Theatre of the Real* 5). Noble's onstage presence is central to his work and, in this chapter, I make use of Deirdre Heddon's insights from *Autobiography and Performance* (2008) to analyse his presentation of self. The form of Crouch and Blythe's plays reflect the precarity that their content explores. This is also the case in *You're Not Alone*: the structural apparatus of Noble's performance reflects the precarity in the content of his piece. In this chapter, I will examine how his use of an audience participant instantiates precarity for other spectators, through viscerally revealing interdependency and vulnerability to the Other.

The content of *You're Not Alone* explores Butler's existential precarity through highlighting moments of personal vulnerability and interdependency between himself and the subjects he records to create his performance, including showing footage of his interactions with strangers, alongside documenting his elderly father's decline: this reveals susceptibility to the Other, and vulnerability to injury and death. *You're Not Alone* also explores Berlant's ongoing condition of societal precarity through projects which highlight precarious labour and existences: including, his unpaid 'work' in B&Q, yearning for connection, and documentation

⁷⁴ 'Performance' is a contested term, which covers a wide variety of art and behaviours. In using it here, I turn to Marvin Carlson who offers a useful explanation of some attributes of performance art: "[i]ts practitioners, almost by definition, do not base their work upon characters previously created by other artists, but upon their own bodies, their own autobiographies, their own specific experiences in a culture or in the world, made performative by their consciousness of them and the process of displaying them for audiences. Since the emphasis is upon the performance, and on how the body or self is articulated through performance, the individual body remains at the center of such presentations. Typical performance art is solo art, and the typical performance artist uses little of the elaborate scenic surroundings, of the traditional stage, but at most a few props, a bit of furniture, and whatever costume (sometimes even nudity) is most suitable to the performance situation" (*Performance* 5-6). This description of performance art typifies the attributes of Noble's work.

of the isolated lives of men whom he secretly films. The broad critical reception of *You're Not Alone* tends to characterise it as a performance about encouraging community-mindedness and celebrating instances of personal connection. However, I suggest this view is reductive. Noble's work is subtler: he cleverly exposes the paradoxical nature of community and interrogates the affective complexities of living alongside others. In fact, I argue that his work reflects on and instantiates a cruel optimism: Noble's *You're Not Alone* indicates that the realities of life will never live up to the Hollywood fantasy equivalent. Both theories of precarity – societal and existential – are revealed as connected when Noble affectively creates moments of personal vulnerability between himself and his audience: the precarious moments he shows on filmed footage is then affectively embodied in the audience.

This chapter is structured in five sections. First, I offer an overview of Noble's performance work so far, to lay the foundations for exploring *You're Not Alone*. This includes an analysis of his other major solo production, *Kim Noble Will Die* (2009). Then, I investigate how technology operates in *You're Not Alone* as an indexical trace of the real, and following this I analyse the archive, and then presence. Again, it is important to note that by using distinct sections to analyse the three indexical traces of the real, I am not dividing them into isolated elements: they all work collaboratively to form the 'a reality braid'; however, for purposes of analysis and clarity of reading, I take each process in turn. Finally, I explore how these indexical traces of the real allow Noble to explore and stage precarity in *You're Not Alone*.

5.2 Kim Noble: career and critical reception

Noble's artistic work spans many genres: video animation, short films, television sitcoms, online podcasts, artistic interventions, gallery exhibitions and theatrical performances. Most of these are documented on his highly performative website which includes podcasts, short films and blog posts. A (presumably) self-written biography (under a tab entitled 'ME') describes the dominant motifs of his work:

Kim's work uses a provocative and humorous style to expose the human condition: notions of death, sexuality, gender and religion are picked at with dry comedic use of tragedy meshed with absurdity. He has a girls [*sic*] name and no longer smells of wee.

This flippant and incongruous final comment is typical of Noble's performative style – he often juxtaposes the banal and the vulgar using a playful and irreverent persona.

Noble studied Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University and, following this, began a career in performance comedy, establishing a working relationship with the actor and writer Stuart Silver (also a Sheffield Hallam alumnus):

Having originally tried to make a living selling humorous artworks to galleries, Noble eventually teamed up with his fellow ex-art student Stuart Silver and began performing comedy gigs which were really more video-based performance pieces. (Tucker 138)

The pair named their double-act ‘Noble and Silver’ and, in 2000, they won a Perrier Award for Best Newcomer at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Their partnership continued for several years, and most notably they created a six-part television series (*Noble and Silver: Get Off Me!*), for the channel E4, which first aired in 2001. Gary Reich produced the series and continued to collaborate with Noble, co-directing both *Kim Noble Will Die* (with Flick Fernando) and *You’re Not Alone*. Alongside these projects, Noble starred in the comedy television series *Garth Marengi’s Darkplace*, and *The Mighty Boosh*.

Noble’s two solo stage productions, which he wrote and performed, are *Kim Noble Will Die* and *You’re Not Alone*. Most recently, Noble was a lead deviser on *Wild Life FM* (2018) at the Unicorn Theatre, a “live radio show” in which nine young musicians used music to explore what it feels like to be a young person (Unicorn Theatre website). Noble also uses social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) to document his artistic projects. In this way, Noble’s performance work bleeds into all areas of his life and across a range of media. Indeed, Noble suggests that the artistic projects in his life are not always intended as material for his shows, but are just the way he lives his life:

I certainly didn’t go, ‘God, I’m lonely. Fuck it, I’ll make a show about loneliness.’ I can’t do that – I’m not talented enough. I just went out and did these projects and filmed them, not knowing where they would go and what they’re for. (Noble in Logan, 2015)

For Noble, his performances are simply a continuation of his daily activities and personal projects. He highlights the inextricable relationship between his life and art in his performances: “this stuff just goes on and on for me”, he comments in *You’re Not Alone*. I have attended each of Noble’s latest three productions, and the first of these was *Kim Noble Will Die*, at the Soho Theatre in 2009. It is worth briefly outlining the central motifs and concerns of *Kim Noble Will Die* because they will provide useful points of comparison with *You’re Not Alone*.

5.3 *Kim Noble Will Die*

Kim Noble Will Die premiered at the Soho Theatre in April 2009 and subsequently played at the 2009 Edinburgh Fringe Festival at the Assembly @ George Street. Following a largely positive press response, the show toured to venues throughout the UK in 2009 – 2010 (including the greenrooms, Manchester; Arncliffe, Bristol, and the Brighton Fringe Festival), and it also returned to the Soho Theatre for the Christmas slot in December 2009. The production continued to tour throughout 2011, including internationally (Performance Space 122's COIL Festival in the US).

Kim Noble Will Die was “made after suffering a breakdown, being diagnosed with manic depression and having suicidal thoughts” (Williams ‘Kim Noble interview’). The show traverses complex and delicate themes, including mental illness, a relationship break-up and the act of suicide. It featured multimedia throughout, documenting moments from Noble’s life. A large proportion of the footage was graphic sequences related to bodily functions and fluids including Noble eating dog food, ejaculating, and self-harming. Alongside this, Noble also used satire to comment on celebrity culture and consumerism: he inserts additions to celebrity autobiographies and replaces them on bookshelves. Aleks Sierz deems this content “derivative”: “‘improving’ books imitates Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell, the explicit sex is reminiscent of Tim Fountain's *Sex Addict* and the cutting comes from Franco B by way of Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill” (*Kim Noble Will Die* review). Whether or not Noble was inspired by these other provocative artists, *Kim Noble Will Die* tested the limits of its performer and audience, and its provocative content caught the attention of press and theatregoers. The *UK Theatre Web* described how it “fast became one of the most talked about shows of the year”; *Time Out* crowned it as “by far the best show of 2009 [...] one of the greatest works of comedy art every created”, and the *Evening Standard* declared that it pushed “the very limits of humour, taste, decency and even legality”.

Kim Noble Will Die may have generated a largely celebratory response from theatre critics and bloggers, but it also received some criticism in relation to ethical and legal concerns for the performer and others implicated in the production. For example, Brian Logan’s interview with Noble notes his ex-girlfriend “threatened to sue” (2009) after Noble distributed her number to the audience and encouraged them to send her abusive messages. The write up of the show on the *Real Time Arts* website claims “past audiences have actually reported this show to the police”.

A particular concern highlighted by reviewers and audience members was for Noble’s welfare. In her interview with Noble for *Wow 24/7*, Kate Copstick describes “a warning letter

to Soho Theatre from a consultant psychiatrist who wanted the show stopped, and declared Noble mentally unfit to be appearing on stage and a danger to himself". *Kim Noble Will Die* appeared to prompt an active concern that extended beyond the hour the audience spent in the auditorium with him. Hayley Campbell's *BuzzFeed* interview with Noble describes the way in which some audience members converged over a shared feeling of responsibility towards him:

[...] Kim told the audience that unless anyone met him on Waterloo Bridge at 4am on a specific date the following month, he would throw himself into the Thames. Then, in an unprecedented move, people in London actually gave a shit. They not only remembered the date for longer than the wait for the night bus home, they planned their lives around it and waited for him on a bridge, in the middle of the night, four weeks later.

Through extending the moment of performance beyond the temporal confines of the hour spent in the theatre – for both himself, and his audience – *Kim Noble Will Die* explored the potential for performance to be a generative space of collective care.

Alongside Noble's emotional safety as a performer, a criticism levelled at the show was that it performed misogyny. *Kim Noble Will Die* revolved around Noble's unhappy relationship with several women in his life, including his mother and ex-girlfriend; *Real Time Arts* claimed the piece was "very, very male". Several filmed actions in the show were notable for hostility towards women, as pointed out by Logan: "[o]ne such stunt involves doing something very unpleasant to a feminine hygiene product [ejaculating into a Vagisil bottle]: one of several misogynist touches" (2009). However, women in the audience were also singled out to interact with Noble. Throughout the performance, some female audience members were chosen to receive pots of his ejaculate, in order to ensure the world could be populated with his offspring, even if he commits suicide.

When I saw the show in 2009, I was one of the women chosen to receive a pot of Noble's ejaculate. This interaction was not one I had been warned about beforehand, and therefore prompted an entirely unplanned moment of improvisatory connection between myself as audience member, and Noble. At the end of the performance, Noble asked the entire audience to leave and then held one-to-one discussions with the women on stage, whilst filling in details on a form which would decide whether they were suitable to bear his child. This part of the performance received critical comments in the press. For example, Veronica Lee, from *The Arts Desk*, suggested at this moment "the evening veered into creepy, misogynistic territory" and became "self-indulgent wank". Personally, I did not find this especially uncomfortable, even though the show had been, at times, unsettling. I think this is

because Noble's performance style is particularly non-threatening – his vocal tone is non-assertive, even-paced, often humorously deadpan. His persona recalls Dan Rebellato's accurate description of Tim Crouch's performance style:

He [...] strips his performances of anything that would separate him from the audience. [...] He presents the lines of dialogue vividly but without very strong characterization, emotional colour or physical embodiment. The vocal style is even, assertoric, clear. His performance is, as Stephen Bottoms describes it, a 'relatively neutral canvas' on which the audience can paint. ('Tim Crouch' 129-130.)

This description resonates with Noble's performance style, which is similarly characterised by an unreadable directness, neutral in intention. Furthermore, during performances, Noble reveals intimate and personal information about himself, which increases his own vulnerability: at times he appears visibly nervous. In relation to *You're Not Alone*, one reviewer comments "I was not sure whether I wanted to hug him or perform some kind of citizen's arrest", suggesting that the affective vulnerability Noble creates moves between performer and audience (Crawley). This interaction could be classed under what Alice O'Grady names a "risky aesthetics", which describes performance practices "where there is some degree of surrender, or relinquishing of control to others", such as "interacting with performers in one-to-one, intimate situations" (x). O'Grady argues that performers "utilise risk in performance as a way of commenting on, grappling with, and critiquing how risk is experienced in the day to day" (x). As this chapter will unfold, Noble's use of such precarious risk and proximity with individual audience members offers him a way to evaluate precarity in a wider sense. For me, the experience of the live interaction in *Kim Noble Will Die* highlighted the potential for performance to be a highly affective singular experience in which the performer and audience member can be simultaneously exposed to risk.

Having provided an overview of *Kim Noble Will Die*, the next section examines the most relevant scholarship on Noble in order to identify my contribution to the existing material.

5.4 Scholarship and critical reception

As I highlighted in the introduction to this thesis, there is minimal scholarship that investigates Noble's practice and part of the aspiration of this chapter is to establish Noble as

an important figure of contemporary performance.⁷⁵ This presents some difficulty to my research, as without existing material to evaluate, it becomes harder to situate my work within a critical field, in dialogue with other scholars. However, this also opens an opportunity to contribute to contemporary performance scholarship by calling for a wider appraisal of Noble's work.

Although there is little published scholarship on Noble, a few academics have given conference papers on his work and mention him in articles.⁷⁶ The main area of scholarship in which Noble's name and work is referenced is performance and mental health. For example, in his introduction to the artist James Leadbitter (also known as 'the vacuum cleaner'), Stephen Greer highlights *Kim Noble Will Die*, alongside performance by others such as Demi Nandhra, as examples of works that "can be located within an increasingly diverse field of autobiographical performance concerning mental health and neurodiversity by artists whose practices straddle theatre, comedy, one to one performance, and visual art" (29). Maria Patsou also categorises Noble within this field, noting that "performance on mental illness (amongst other things) from a younger generation of emerging artists" such as Noble "can be added to the list" of "practitioners who have pushed the envelope on what we consider theater" ('Reflections...' 116).⁷⁷ This situates Noble within a particular strand of performance art attached to mental health, and prompts comparisons with artists working within that same field. However, these categorisations and comparisons often fail to acknowledge the many other prominent themes of Noble's work, and I want to shift that focus in this chapter. Given the parameters of my research, I concentrate on the relationship of his performance to the real and precarity.

A feature of the scant critical commentary on Noble that exists is that he is often mentioned in relation to the status of 'truth' within his work. For example, Patsou has

⁷⁵ Indeed, to my knowledge, the key published text covering Noble's work is my article in *Performance Research* 22.3. (2017) titled 'When "Lady in Red" plays, Dance with the Person Next to You'. An earlier version of some of the work in this chapter appeared in this article.

⁷⁶ On 4 February 2010 Broderick Chow gave a paper entitled 'Kim Noble will help you get through it: strategies for redefining the political in comedy performance' (London Theatre Seminar, 4 February 2010). Maria Patsou has presented two papers that engage with Noble's work: 'Fragmented Entrainment and Contaminated Affect: The Positive Side of Negativity in Kim Noble's *You're Not Alone*' ('Theatres of Contagion: Infectious Performance', Birkbeck, May 2017), and 'Disrupted and Difficult Affect' (CHASE event, Birkbeck, December 2017). In May 2016, I presented "'When *Lady in Red* plays, dance with the person next to you": loneliness and intimacy in Kim Noble's *You're Not Alone*' at 'Conventions of Proximity in Art, Theatre and Performance' conference (Birkbeck). I presented "'I went through your bins Mrs Cummings to discover exactly who you are": Economic and Social Subversion in Kim Noble's *You're Not Alone*' at 'Environment, Economy and Climate Change: Stages in Transition' conference (University of Birmingham, July 2016).

⁷⁷ Maria Patsou is a current postgraduate student at Birkbeck, University of London, researching "affect and performativity" in UK performance artists, using Kim Noble as a case study (Birkbeck website).

published interesting work detailing the methodologies of her research and, although Noble does not feature prominently in these articles, she has written about her experience of doubting the reality of the autobiographical performances of Leadbitter and Noble: “whether they exaggerated their experience or whether they are telling the truth” (‘Reflections...’ 120). Indeed, reality is thrown into question during Noble’s performances and the affective impact of this on an audience works to destabilise their own sense of security in the real, as I will later discuss. Similarly, in Brian Lobel’s review of the Live Art Development Agency’s *Access All Areas* event (2011), he responds to Noble’s “lecture performance” by assessing the impact that Noble’s presentation of self had on the response of the audience:

during Noble’s lecture performance – in which he read a possibly fictional letter denouncing his performance and insisting that his mental illness (the topic of his show) demanded “emergency clinical assessment” – the audience was given space to simultaneously laugh in agreement and sit with their own disagreements with his abrasive, ethically-questionable methodologies. (95)

Interestingly, with the use of the term “possibly fictional”, Lobel again highlights uncertainty as to whether Noble’s work is authentic, or not.

The book *Great British Eccentrics* (2015) dedicates a few pages to Noble. S. D. Tucker suggests Noble is “a modern day comedian and performance artist for whom the dividing line between art and life seems thin indeed” (138). The references to Noble are largely descriptive passages about *Kim Noble Will Die* and *You’re Not Alone*, though, intriguingly, Tucker draws parallels between Noble’s behaviour and the surrealist movement:

Noble’s amazing existence seems to embody the idea of a ‘Surrealist person’ [...] For the Surrealists, [...] it was possible to embody the ideals of their artistic movements without actually producing any writings or artworks, simply through the way you lived your life – which, in practice, meant living it extremely strangely, transgressing the normal rules of society and becoming a kind of living work of art. (141)

Tucker’s connection between the Surrealist artists and life as a work of art suggests that there is a strong connection between Noble’s early artistic training, and his current performative projects.

Sara Jane Bailes’ *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (2011) also mentions Noble stating that his work “examines the artist’s entire life as a series of unmitigated disasters and failures, applying a corrosive and brutally revealing glimpse into his

‘own life’” (5). For her, Noble intends “to be offensive and often shocking”, but one of Bailes’ main observations is Noble’s subversive politics in relation to how humans operate within capitalist culture:

Noble’s performances are also deeply self-parodic and compose a critique of the everyday, advertising, and the passivity of consumer culture that is both light-hearted and politically aggressive. (6)

This observation is particularly significant for my own argument, which will unravel the ways in which Noble undermines economic and societal structures, and, in doing so, critiques the dominant capitalist ideology. Bailes also discusses how *You’re Not Alone* poses a challenge to the idea of “acceptable behaviour on stage” through his lack of censorship over the material he presents:

Failure in Noble’s terms might be understood as a rejection of the prescribed limits of taste. The success of the piece – which has done very well commercially, though not without extreme reactions to the show’s content from press and public – is measured by the degree to which Noble is able to create a piece with little compromise or censorship of the material he chooses to share with his audience, and the extent to which he can extend the limits of acceptable behaviour on stage, balancing this with the humor and wit of his observations. (6)

Bailes suggests that the success of Noble’s work lies in the lack of censorship that he (and his producers) impose on his work. This is relevant to my analysis because a rejection of censorship implies that Noble’s performance offers unmediated access to the real on stage. Whilst, indeed, Noble opposes censorship (“I don’t want to be censored. I don’t want anything to be censored” (in Logan ‘I haven’t killed anyone...’)), Bailes’ commentary on Noble is minimal: her focus lies elsewhere, and she does not offer an in-depth analysis of his performance.

In the next section, I will briefly describe *You’re Not Alone* to clarify the content of the piece given the absence of a published text, whilst drawing attention to its visual elements and key sequences.

5.5 *You’re Not Alone*

You’re Not Alone is an hour-long solo performance written and performed by Noble in which he narrates episodes from his life to the audience, accompanied by low-fi documentary footage of these events displayed on a large screen. The show is Noble’s most recent solo

performance and was co-commissioned by the Soho Theatre and In Between Time.⁷⁸ The production premièred in 2014 at the Traverse Theatre, as part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It won the Judges' Award at the Total Edinburgh Fringe Festival Theatre Awards and was nominated for two Chortle awards, the British awards dedicated to recognising live stand-up comedians working professionally. The show subsequently had several runs at the Soho Theatre and toured throughout 2015 – 2017.

The scenic elements of *You're Not Alone* are minimal: Noble is dressed simply: trousers, jacket and a t-shirt (that one time I saw the show had the absurd noncommittal slogan "I quite like teeth" emblazoned across it). The stage is relatively bare and the most obvious feature of the set is a large screen, which virtually covers the back wall of the stage. Throughout the show, footage on the screen flicks between a range of shots of mostly digital technologies: various Google homepage searches, Facebook feeds, chat room boxes, text messages, webcam chats with people, and pre-recorded video. Noble introduces us to his life and the people whom he regularly encounters – his neighbours, and internet strangers. For example, the screen shows surreptitious footage of the Polish taxi driver who lives opposite Noble, cleaning his taxi and kissing his girlfriend, whilst Noble comments "that's the girlfriend coming back from Morrisons".

It is difficult to offer a simple overview of how the performance is structured as the show follows many different narrative threads, which are chronologically jumbled. There are no blackouts, demarcations of different sections, or clear scene changes – Noble continually speaks to the audience, and that relationship is never broken. However, there are several narrative paths which can be followed throughout the performance, some of which intertwine. One of the focal points of *You're Not Alone* is Noble's attempt to find connection and purpose in his life. There are three ways he attempts to achieve this: through finding a 'job', through striking up relationships with strangers, and through inventing community projects in his neighbourhood.

The performance opens with an idyllic utopic shot of a bright blue sky, while Noble sits at a table, with his laptop, and sings the opening lines to Sinead O'Connor's *Nothing Compares 2U*: "it's been seven hours and fifteen days...", which he follows by saying "...since I found your lifeless body on the pavement". On the screen there is footage of "this lifeless body" – a dead pigeon on a pavement. "These streets are like a freakin' jungle man, you take what you can get", Noble says, as he contemplates why the pigeon has been ignored

⁷⁸ In Between Time are artistic producers, and Noble is currently one of their Associate Artists. (In Between Time website)

by others. He takes its body home because “another artist might come and pick it up” and the audience witnesses graphic footage of Noble attempting taxidermy on the pigeon.

Immediately, this suggests that Noble is drawn to interrogating what is ignored by other people (the pigeon corpse on the pavement), has an interest in ideas of death and the abject body (taxidermy of the pigeon corpse), and a self-referential awareness of his life as an artistic work (his comment that another artist may use the pigeon, if he does not).

Not long after these opening moments, Noble chooses a male participant from the audience, who remains on stage with Noble for the rest of the performance. Noble uses the participant in various ways – talking to him, dressing him up, and asking him to perform some actions. This relationship is an important feature of the politics of *You're Not Alone*, as I will later clarify.

A central narrative thread running through the performance, and introduced early on, is Noble's obsession with an older man named Keith who works as a cashier in a Morrisons supermarket. At first, Noble's fascination with Keith leads him to repeatedly use Keith's checkout when buying groceries, and he surreptitiously films their interactions. Noble's schemes to attract Keith's attention become more elaborate, including spending “£128” on condoms because he wants “Keith to think that I was having sex”.

A key part of the show follows Noble's subversive work in B&Q stores. Noble explains how he wants “something bigger” from life and, to satisfy this need, Noble applies “for a job at B&Q”. His initial online job application is rejected so he prints his own carefully copied B&Q label on to an orange apron to pretend to customers and other staff that he works there. Noble explains he worked in B&Q for over a year, undetected, and shows the audience covert filmed footage of him ‘working’ in B&Q and interacting with customers. Noble ‘quits’ this ‘job’ in B&Q by ringing up Human Resources to tell them he is leaving because IKEA benefits are better, and he plays the audience a recording of this conversation. However, on his first day ‘working’ in IKEA, Noble is approached by security after trying to dance with a customer and interrogated as to why he is wearing a yellow shirt branded ‘IKEA’. He is arrested by police, and the audience witness parts of this event, which he secretly records.

Noble expends considerable time and labour attempting to connect with strangers on the internet. He creates the persona of ‘Sarah’, and establishes numerous online relationships between himself (as Sarah) and men. For example, on the screen the audience see Noble scroll through hundreds of Facebook messages between ‘Sarah’ and a man named Dave Collier. The amount of labour that Noble commits to projects that surround his performance is also revealed when onscreen footage shows him shaving and waxing his body hair in

preparation to photograph himself as ‘Sarah’, and to meet some of these men in person.

During the performance, Noble strips out of his clothing and into a red dress, and auburn wig, revealing his ‘Sarah’ persona to the audience. The main relationship documented is between ‘Sarah’ and a lorry driver named Jon, and he displays text messages on the large screen sent between Jon and ‘Sarah’. Although Noble does not meet Jon in person, he meets (as Sarah) several other men for ‘dates’ that he has established an online relationship with.

The wide range of projects, characters and plot treads traversed in *You’re Not Alone* is overwhelming in number and their relationality can be a little unclear (apart from the fact each are linked through Noble). However, one significant narrative thread appears to tie all the ancillary stories and ideas together: Noble’s footage of his father. This footage is introduced in the same way as the dead pigeon at the beginning of the show – Noble sings Sinead O’Connor: “it’s been seven hours and...”, this time ending the refrain with the phrase “245 days since his near lifeless body was found in the street... my hero... the person who got me started on this stuff”. Noble shows the audience footage of his elderly father in what appears to be a residential home, commenting on his degenerative mental state and dilapidated physicality. Footage shown of Noble’s father includes intimate moments, such as washing his father, and Noble singing to him. Later in the performance, Noble claims that the communitarian acts he undertakes are prompted by his father’s comment “just think about what you can be doing to help other people”. This request provides the link between all the different threads of *You’re Not Alone*.

Following this, the performance documents more of Noble’s attempted meetings with men, dressed as ‘Sarah’. His relationship with Jon the lorry driver develops as they partake in their first phone call, during which Noble uses software to disguise his masculine voice. This section of the performance also shows Noble’s attempts to improve the life of those around him through various guerrilla community projects, which include giving out awards to people, such as the “most attractive police officer” award to the police officer who arrested him.

Although *You’re Not Alone* is not structured like a ‘well-made play’, the piece reaches a climax of sorts when Noble manages to engineer a situation which enables him to enter Keith’s flat, and steal a pair of Keith’s underpants – which are now visible on stage, clipped to a rope hanging from the overhead lighting rig. The audience participant then holds Keith’s underpants high in the air, and at this point, Noble continues to fuse the strands of his stories: the participant is dressed in Noble’s father’s clothing.

Towards the end of the performance, Noble prepares to leave the auditorium with the audience participant, an exit he has signalled: “[t]onight feller, I’m just not going to go home

alone”. As Noble and the man walk towards the auditorium exit, on the screen the audience see Noble saying goodbye to his father in the retirement home. Following this, live footage of the outside of the theatre is projected: Noble appears, still in the red dress, exiting the foyer’s door with his audience participant. Noble gives the participant a rucksack and the pair walk down the street until they reach a horse. Noble climbs on to the horse’s back and they walk into the distance, away from the camera, with the audience watching this inside the theatre on the large screen. Noble is hand-in-hand with the audience volunteer who walks alongside the horse. Whilst this action takes place on the screen, there is also action in the theatre. A female audience member, who was given headphones by Noble at the start, offers instructions to unsuspecting audience members to dance with each other on the stage. Without even being physically present in the theatre, Noble has orchestrated a series of events that result in strangers publicly dancing with each other on a stage to end the performance.

Having introduced some of the important elements of *You’re Not Alone*, I now turn to analysing how technology operates throughout the performance as an indexical trace of the real, and how it works to destabilise the real to enhance the precarious.

5.6 Technology

Technology is the key indexical trace of the real for Noble. In a similar way to Blythe, Noble’s performance pieces rely on technology because he requires it to research and plan his performances, and to stage them. Without technology, he would not be able to construct his shows: for Noble, his video camera is his ‘writer’s pen’, in the same way Blythe’s dictaphone enables her to ‘write’ her texts. *You’re Not Alone* is a technological record of Noble’s life, which he then replays to the audience, offering commentary on the digital images and footage. There are two principal ways that Noble uses technology in his performance: showing images of his personal use of technology on the screen (for example, Facebook conversations), and the deployment of it on stage to create the performance (for example, the screen).

“Our age is nothing if not the age of the screen”, writes Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*, and *You’re Not Alone* exemplifies this conjecture (66). The huge screen amplifies all of Noble’s – and his subjects – most intimate and private moments. Its dominance indicates that technology is pervasive, and the images it shows offer the audience access to the real past. The miniature screens of Noble’s laptop, phone etc. that the audience

witness on film are amplified by the large screen: screens within a screen highlights the ubiquity of these technologies.

On the screen Noble scrolls through Facebook and text conversations with men, demonstrating an extensive digital archive of his relationship with these people. Esther Milne discusses how these types of immediate communication technologies create an intimate presence between the two writers: “[w]hen communication seems unmediated, the subject may sense a psychological closeness or intimacy with her interlocutor” (3). Milne describes this as “presence”, which she argues “is an effect achieved in communication (whether by letters, postcards, or email, for example) when interlocutors imagine the psychological or, sometimes, physical presence of the other” (2). The men Noble communicates with imagine he is ‘Sarah’ through the presence he shares with them, constructed by this type of technological immediacy.

In *You’re Not Alone*, the audience see how he records his life using a wide variety of technological devices, which suggests that technology is a way for Noble to capture the real. Noble’s digital archiving of his existence through technology reflects the inclination of people in the age of multimedia to continually digitally capture each moment of their day: they verify past events through referring to a digital record. When he is arrested by the police in IKEA, the audience witness some of this digital record as he shows the audience what the police found on his mobile phone. Noble reveals to the audience that they discovered “loads of photos of me pulling up my scrotum” (which relates to his ‘transformation’ into ‘Sarah’ that the audience have witnessed) and also “stuff like this”: footage of him urinating into his own mouth. The photographs and footage that Noble shows, magnified on the large screen, demonstrate that Noble uses several technological devices to continually record himself. The documentation of these different kinds of technology suggests to the audience that the past events described in the production are real. Through using the screen, Noble is able to ‘make present’ past events, and in doing so, point towards the real. As I indicated in Chapter One, Domietta Torlasco suggests recordings “can repeat themselves accurately and indefinitely, bringing about the recurrence of the past of which they are the indexical trace” (92). Further, the screen shows hundreds of messages between Noble and others, and the personal labour that this involves indicates that the people he is interacting with are actual strangers he has met online, not a construction for performance.

The amateur footage that Noble captures with his video camera implies that he has recorded an unmediated slice of modern life, and that through the technology of Noble’s screen the audience are able to access images and events from the real past. Much of the

material is filmed from Noble's viewpoint – the audience are encouraged to see the world from his unique standpoint. Unlike most of Blythe's subjects, the people that Noble captures through his recordings are unaware they are being filmed. The obliviousness of his subjects to being secretly filmed highlights the culture of surveillance of living in an urban environment, as Bourriaud explains: "if video enables (more or less) anyone to make a movie, it also makes it easier for (more or less) anyone to capture pictures of us. When we move about a city, we are under surveillance" (77). Noble captures many people "[moving] about a city" and the presence of real people in Noble's work is a significant aspect of the performance. The material that he gathers therefore appears to be less mediated than Blythe's because, as I discussed in Chapter Three, the presence of recording equipment alters human behaviour.

Noble also uses the relationship between the technological and live elements of his performance to suggest to his audience that technology is an indexical trace of the real. In Chapter One, I discussed the impact of technology in creating "split subjectivity" during performances, and quoted Matthew Causey who considers that when a live actor and their recorded image simultaneously appear on stage, it signals the real: "the split video image sourcing from a live feed", Causey writes, "re-establishes the status of the real" (390; 389). Whilst Causey discusses live video feeds (such as those at a rock concert), I contend that the video footage of Noble in the past combined with his physical presence on stage also reinforces the real. Firstly, Noble is recognisable on the video footage – the audience are therefore aware that the performer they are with in the theatre was present at the events they witness on the screen. However, Noble, of course, appears slightly different in the filmed footage – his clothes, the length of his hair, and even his facial features have slightly changed due to the passage of time. The idiosyncratic differences between the image on the screen and the performer in the theatre suggest that the footage is an actual document of the past as it demonstrates time passing. The use of "split subjectivity" to enforce the reality of the archival footage also applies to the other people that Noble records. For example, the audience see the Facebook page and photographs of a man named 'Dan Vanol' whom Noble talks to as 'Sarah'. Later in the performance, Dan appears on the screen meeting 'Sarah' for the first time in person at the Southbank Centre. The encounter is filmed secretly from a distance, but it is evident that the man in the Southbank Centre is the same person that features in the photographs on Facebook. The encounter does not last long when Dan realises 'Sarah' is a man wearing a dress, but it adds veracity to the reality of Noble's online and filmed encounters.

However, the images of Noble on the screen also problematise his live presence in the theatre. Noble's shared physical presence with the audience reinforces the reality of his recorded images: this is the same man we see going about his daily business. However, strangely, the images on the screen appear more real because, unlike the rehearsed text and gestures that he has prepared for the performance, Noble's actions on his video camera appear unstaged and spontaneous. The difference between the rehearsed stage persona and unrehearsed filmed persona further reinforces technology as an indexical trace of the real in *You're Not Alone*. Patsou reflects on how the difference in these personas reduces potential audience unease:

the non-stop projections of filmed moments of his and other peoples' lives, not only make Noble an audience to his own life but also alleviate the audience from possible major awkwardness and nervousness, as the harsh reality of some of these snapshots is filtered by the fact that it is not Noble the artist in flesh narrating some of the most embarrassing moments of his life but it is Noble, an on-screen persona, presented by the artist himself. ('Reflections...' 119-120)

Casey argues that the encounter between live performance and film unsettles the reality status of both:

The structure of simultaneous live performance and prerecorded video creates a collision between the aesthetics of dematerialization (the live, the now) and the flow of the televisual (the reproducible) that challenges the autonomous nature of both. (*Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture* 45-46).

Rosemary Kilch and Edward Scheer also comment on the relationship between the live and mediated image: "[t]he degree to which the live and mediated are experienced as equally authentic and real can be most clearly articulated in the instance by which an object or a subject appears both as a live and a mediated presence at the same time" (94). At the end of *You're Not Alone*, Noble uses a live feed to show the audience footage of himself leaving the theatre. At this point, Noble's live image returns completely to the screen, he is no longer physically present in the theatre commenting on his mediated image. This is significant because the live feed that the audience watch recalls the recorded image of Noble witnessed throughout the show – it is on the same large screen, only now *live*. In use of the live feed, the mediated images are conflated with the embodied performer that was physically present on stage: both are now subsumed within the live feed. This suggests that the recorded images the audience watched throughout the show are as real as the naked performer who just stood in front of them, as both now exist in one final screen image. In this way, Noble braids together

his live presence, and the technology of his recorded image, suggesting both are indexical traces of the real.

Noble also reveals technology as a site where identity, and reality, can be destabilised: for example, in his creation of the persona ‘Sarah’ in online communications with strangers. Mark Dery argues that such online communications typically encourage playing with alternative identities: “users can float free of biological and socio-cultural determinants, at least to the degree that their idiosyncratic language usage does not mark them as white, black, college-educated, a high school dropout and so on”, and Sherry Turkle concurs that “connectivity offers new possibilities for experimenting with identity” (2-3, 152). Matt Adams similarly considers the online world as a performative space: “[i]n an online space such as a chat room or a virtual world, the line between audience and performer is blurred and may shift from one moment to the next” (ix). Indeed, the online world offers Noble a chance to construct a new identity, and gender, which Milne claims is common in online exchanges: “in email exchanges subjects also feel free to construct different personae because they believe they are less hindered by the material exigencies of gender, class and race” (196). For Milne, “the fantasy of, and desire for, presence is a key element in the exchanges, communications and performances enabled by these three systems” (202). Comparably, Ghislaine Boddington argues that avatars in the virtual realm offer possibilities to expand the identity of the self: “[w]e now exist in the real and the virtual in many forms – and by participating we aid the gradual dissolution of the boundaries between the real and the virtual. We have moved into an era of representation of the self through diverse virtual bodies, thereby expanding ourselves into many selves” (77).

Noble uses technology as an indexical trace of the real through constructing and dismantling the real in his online encounters, revealing its contingency. For instance, the men Noble interacts with imagine that he is ‘Sarah’, but when he meets some of them in real life, they find he is not who they imagined, and they reject him, fleeing the unexpected situation: “I waited for an hour, but he didn’t come back”. Milne explains “[a]t times, subjects believe the body imagined in these exchanges is more real, more expressive of the writer’s emotions and soul, and this belief may be threatened by the actual body encountered in face-to-face communication” (2). Through his online interactions, Noble shows that the online world is a space of faith, and belief – of transubstantiation, if you will – where identity can be shifted and expanded. However, he also reminds the audience of the precariousness of the online world, as they see the disjoint between the typed sentences of Sarah, and Kim Noble the performer, behind his laptop screen. This is not to say that the difference between Sarah and

Noble is simplistic: Noble questions how his relationship with the men online is any different to the one he had with his ex-girlfriend. Žižek argues that these displacements are complicated:

When I construct a ‘false’ image of myself which stands in for me in a virtual community in which I participate (in sexual games, for example, a shy man often assumes the onscreen persona of an attractive promiscuous woman), the emotions I feel and ‘feign’ as part of my onscreen persona are not simply false. (*Violence* 83)

In revealing the complexities of his identity as Sarah, Noble shows that the digital is a precarious space in which reality, and identity can be destabilised.

5.7 Archive

The Soho Theatre marketed *You’re Not Alone* through encouraging audience members to consider it an archive of Noble’s life, just as the Almeida Theatre persuaded patrons to view *Little Revolution* as an archive of the riots. The show was advertised by the Soho Theatre to draw attention to the archival nature of the piece:

You’re Not Alone is a provocative, moving and comic production that chronicles one man’s attempts at connection, friendship and employment at B&Q. Kim Noble takes his audience on a journey through tower blocks, supermarkets and Facebook, seeking an escape from the loneliness of modern society. It is an intimate glimpse into the mind of an eccentric genius. (Soho Theatre website)

The first entry for the word “chronicle” in the *OED* is a “detailed and continuous register of events in order of time; a historical record, *esp.* one in which the facts are narrated without philosophic treatment, or any attempt at literary style”. The use of the term “chronicles” in material used to advertise the show implies that *You’re Not Alone* provides an unmediated record of the past. The “journey” that the audience are taken on could therefore be considered an archival journey, as Steedman notes of the archive, one “made from selected and carefully chosen documentation from the past” (68). The phrase “intimate glimpse into the mind of an eccentric genius” suggests that an important aspect of the performance is that it presents ideas and material from the enigmatic perspective – “the mind” – of Kim Noble. Therefore, it is a warning that the archival material in the show will be presented from his viewpoint – this will be a peek into an archive that has the archivist’s fingerprints all over it. However, the publicity still uses the archive to tempt prospective patrons: it is an “intimate glimpse”, which reinforces the connection between the archive and desire that I explored in Chapter Two. The

Soho Theatre implies that by coming to see the production, an audience will be provided with something secretive and “intimate”. This erotic lure of the archive highlights the affect of the real – the experience of coming into contact with someone’s private past can be thrilling.

Throughout *You’re Not Alone*, Noble reveals the different ways that he has chronicled and documented his own life, and the interactions he has with other people. Most obviously, the filmed footage he has recorded of himself and others operates as an archival trace of the past. Like Blythe suggests about her recordings, Noble captures his material ‘on the hoof’, to ensure he encapsulates an authentic picture of his actual life and the genuine encounters within his daily existence. Comparably to Blythe, Noble chooses to record ‘ordinary’ people who may otherwise be overlooked: Mohammed, a takeaway owner; Keith, a supermarket cashier; Jon, a long-distance lorry-driver, and his father. However, it is not just the people in Noble’s recordings that indicate the footage should be understood as an archival trace, but the places that he films too. Noble films places some audience members should recognise from everyday life – suburban streets, the inside of a Morrisons supermarket, and the hardware store B&Q. These places are what Marc Augé suggests “cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity”, “a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, to the temporary and ephemeral” (63). In recording himself in these “temporary” spaces, Noble reinforces the idea that the majority of contemporary life is characterised by negotiating such precarious spaces.

The detail with which Noble presents the subjects he records (names can be viewed on the screen, alongside images of their physical appearance) suggests to the audience that these people are actual strangers that Noble interacts with. However, presenting autobiographical work within the confines of a theatrical setting will always throw that reality into question, given theatre’s propensity to works of the imagination and structures of narrative, editing, and mediation. Heddon observes that “the binary between fictional/real is notoriously unstable in all autobiographical performance” (10). The instability of the real in autobiographical performance, combined with the lure of the archive that Noble presents in *You’re Not Alone*, encourages the audience to become archival researchers themselves, to consider and question the material Noble presents. For example, Patsou describes her experience of attempting to track down people Noble mentions in *You’re Not Alone*, following the show:

I found myself going back to the information he gave about strangers during his performance, trying to identify the truth in his stories, becoming myself a culprit of voyeurism as much as he himself appeared to be in his performance. In this sense the performance had an instant afterlife which was then extended even further by

systematically investigating it through my research. ('Researching...' 4)

Patsou's need to verify the existence of the subjects of Noble's work also speaks to the gesture of autobiographical theatre as a form that offers certain 'promises' to the audience, as I discussed in Chapter Three in relation to Reinelt's comment on the "promise" of documentary theatre. In any case, the ostensible veracity of autobiographical performance is left up to each individual audience member, as Heddon usefully points out:

In the last instance, of course, the decision of whether a work is considered autobiographical must lie with the spectator. This, perhaps, begs the question of whether the autobiographical 'status' of a work matters. That I believe something has happened (or will happen or will happen again) does place my experience in a different emotional register. The 'real', even if intellectually understood as contingent, nevertheless retains its pull – and so it should, given that its impacts are often painfully tangible. (10)

In terms of *You're Not Alone*, I contend that the autobiographical status of this work does matter precisely because the destabilisation of the real that it creates draws attention to contemporary precarity.

The investigative archival work that Patsou partook in after seeing *You're Not Alone* suggests that an aspect of the performance threw the validity of Noble's autobiographical archive into question. Patsou claims that this relates to the "absurdity" of the events that Noble replays in *You're Not Alone*, which is something she also felt in relation to the vacuum cleaner: "[t]he absurdity of some of the vacuum cleaner's and Kim Noble's stories provoked me to investigate whether what I was seeing on stage was real or not during the performance" ('Reflections...' 119). For Patsou, the absurdity of Noble's activities destabilised her own relationship to the real. Noble's activities can be classed as 'uncanny', in Freudian terms: "that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Freud 1-2). Through destabilising recognisable objects and places, Noble's actions subvert a comforting security in the real. In taking familiar situations and contexts (such as B&Q or Morrisons) and behaving irreverently and inappropriately within those contexts, Noble encourages a reconsideration of the politics of those public spaces. In this way, through his subversive activities, Noble's work foregrounds artificial societal constructs and critiques those structures.

The discussion so far has focused on Noble's use of digital technology to archive experience, and how this absurdity of some of this footage unsettles the audience's understanding of reality. However, in *You're Not Alone*, Noble also uses material items to

formulate the archive as a trace of the real. As I highlighted in Chapter One in my discussion of the archive, Julian Thomas explains how material objects can provide a trace of the real past, “things can serve as a witness to a human past” (81). The action of retaining an object that relates to a past experience is an act of archival memorialisation: objects carry significance, and act as evidential reminders of a previous time. Noble uses the motif of clothing as a form of archival knowledge towards the end of the production when he displays the “unwashed pants” that he claims belong to Keith. Noble explains to the audience how he acquired Keith’s underpants, revealing that he started following Keith home from work. To support this, on the screen there is grainy footage of Keith leaving Morrisons on his bicycle and cycling home. Noble suggests he is simply looking out for Keith’s welfare – to “check” Keith “gets home safely”. Noble now knows where Keith lives and comments “I knew I had to get in there somehow and see how this man lives”. Noble gains access to Keith’s property by attempting to present Keith with another award, and then asking “[c]an I use your toilet?” Keith obliges and the next images shown are of Noble stealing a pair of underpants from the bathroom floor. He follows this by commenting, “it’s funny what you take away from a relationship when it ends, isn’t it?” implying that, for him, Keith’s underpants are an archival object that memorialises their ‘relationship’. The presence of the underpants on stage following their image on the filmed footage works to reinforce them as a trace of the real. The underpants are ‘doubled’: they exist on the screen, and in the theatre, which verifies their actuality. The audience have watched so much surreptitious footage of Keith throughout *You’re Not Alone*, the appearance of something that materially belongs to him is a further reinforcement of the man’s existence – the material archive of Keith. The affect of the material archive is also used by Noble when he dresses the audience participant in his father’s clothing. In much the same way that Blythe’s actors are ‘haunted’ by the voice of the original contributor, Noble’s participant (and indeed, the stage itself) is ‘haunted’ by these items of clothing – they suggest the presence of a real past. Further, Noble demonstrates a similarity with the character of Dawn in *An Oak Tree* – a belief in the importance of the material remnants of a person. In this way, Noble uses both the digital and the material archive throughout *You’re Not Alone* to reinforce the real in the theatre.

The archive is a form of knowledge and Noble articulates that his recordings and projects are a way for him to receive knowledge concerning his neighbours: “[t]he Bible says love thy neighbour, but how can you love thy neighbour if you don’t really know them?” However, the incomplete and edited nature of archival material means there is always the potential for items contained within the archive to construct a different impression of the

original event, or person. In Chapter Four I explored the potential for Blythe's recordings to inaccurately reflect the experience and personalities of those she records. Similarly, the existence of Noble's footage may construct his subjects in a way that they may not desire. This is particularly relevant because he films them without their knowledge, therefore there is no opportunity for them to moderate their behaviour in the knowledge they are being recorded for posterity.

Noble reveals the potential for archival evidence to be incorrectly read by showing footage of a time he investigates the contents of his neighbour's bin-bags. He explains to the audience that in order to provide "help" for his elderly neighbour – Mrs Cummings – he will examine the contents of her bins to ascertain more about her, and determine how he can assist her. At night, in secret, he rifles through her rubbish and shows the audience footage of this: "I went through your bins Mrs Cummings to discover exactly who you are [...] who is this woman? Who is Mrs Cummings?" Noble finds bones in Mrs Cummings' rubbish and attempts to piece them together to discover "what she eats". It should be clear to the audience that the bones are fried chicken bones, seen littered across London streets. However, in his typical uncanny style, Noble obscurely rearranges the bones and humorously deduces that Mrs Cummings has, in fact, been eating "a snake". In Chapter One I detailed how Diana Taylor highlights the archivist's interpretative agency when writing "bones might remain the same, even though their story may change, depending on who examines them" (45). Here, Noble's behaviour exemplifies this – he examines bones found in Mrs Cummings bin and interprets a story from this. His actions here also reflect Julian Thomas' discussion of the "textual record", which I explicated in Chapter One: in the textual record, the archivist goes *into* the world of the archive in order to formulate an interpretation of the evidence they are provided with (55-59). This is exactly the behaviour of Noble with Mrs Cummings' bins: Noble – as archivist – creates an interpretation about Mrs Cummings' past behaviour from the evidence found in her bins, performatively interpreting her past. However, the audience (and presumably Noble) are aware that his interpretation of "a snake" is an incorrect deduction. In this way, Noble suggests that the archive has the potential to provide inaccurate evidence of the past, and, therefore, he questions his own evidence and archival practice, suggesting to the audience that they may be interpreting what he presents in an incorrect way. He places assuredness in the archive – in the real – under question, troubling our perceptions and deductions. In a similar way to Blythe and Crouch, Noble therefore deconstructs his own work from within the work itself. *You're Not Alone* interrogates its own construction of the

real and can therefore be understood as an example of the extradiegetic real, which I outlined in Chapter One.

Filming his examination of Mrs Cummings' bins not only allows Noble to deconstruct his own dramaturgical practices, but it also provides him with an opportunity to critique capitalist and neoliberal structures, another focal feature of his performance art. For an audience, rifling through somebody's bins to establish more about them may, at first, appear an unconventional way to help someone. However, is it so unconventional in a society that is obsessed by dictating identity in relation to what people purchase? The relationship between identity and what people buy is a preoccupation of the show: for example, Noble suggests that Keith the cashier will be able to know things about him through what he scans at the checkout. Noble therefore buys "a scented candle so Keith thinks I'm sensual", and Tampax, so Keith will think that he has a girlfriend. It is through our economic transactions – and the material waste produced from that – that our identity can be interpreted. Noble uses moments such as these to question the culture of consumerism. By performing behaviour that mirrors capitalist, consumerist activity, Noble suggests that it is only through examining Mrs Cummings' consumption habits – what she has bought, eaten, used and thrown away – that he can work out exactly "who" this woman is. However, as stated, he fails to work out "who" this woman is – the waste from her material archive has misled him.

The deceptive nature of the archive is further revealed when Noble engages with men on the internet as 'Sarah'. The lorry-driver, Jon, asks for "pics" of Sarah and Noble adapts his own body to generate images of Sarah's anatomy. The audience watch footage of Noble pushing his pectoral chest muscles together to produce the illusion of breasts and using Photoshop to edit to this effect. Other footage reveals Noble gluing his own pubic hair on to raw chicken fillets to create the illusion of an image of a vagina. He sends these images to Jon as though they are Sarah's real breasts and vagina. This footage highlights to the audience that images can be deceptive, and should be continually questioned for their accuracy in representation.

5.8 Presence

5.8.1 *The presence of the audience*

In *You're Not Alone*, Noble uses presence in a variety of ways: both on the screen in the footage he replays, and live in the theatre with the audience. As Noble is the only performer

on stage, his relationship with the audience is central to this analysis and it is necessary to provide an overview of the presence he establishes with them – both physically, and emotionally. Spatially, Noble performs his show in studio and theatre spaces which have raked seating and a stage space that separates performed action from the audience: a traditional end-on audience/performer relationship. The experience of being surrounded by people yet feeling isolated can be affectively evoked for audience members in the auditorium – whilst Noble discusses his own loneliness, the spectators are physically surrounded by many people, yet, perhaps, may be watching the performance alone. As Tim Bano notes, the solitary experience of being one amongst many only works in Noble’s favour: “[a]udiences are strange things – despite being surround by hundreds of other people, a show can seem quite solitary, a personal and private experience. Noble forces interaction between us”.

From the start of the performance Noble destabilises traditional structures of audience/performer proxemics. For example, prior to the show he mingles in the bar with his audience; he talks to them in the queue and foyer; he enters the space with them; he employs direct address throughout the piece (to the extent of singling out individuals for responses); and, he uses several audience ‘volunteers’. This close spatial interaction with audience members before and during the performance breaks the ‘fourth wall’ and establishes his presence as external to the temporal and spatial locus of the performance space. In so doing, Noble goes some way to achieve what Crouch terms a “levelling-out” with the audience – a democratising of the spatial and emotional proximity between himself and his audience (Crouch in Svich 215). Reducing the gap between audience and performer encourages a greater identification between the two, which is central to the political implications of *You’re Not Alone* that examines the relationships between strangers. A key factor in this attempt at an informal relationship with the audience is the improvisatory nature of Noble’s delivery: in common with Crouch, he instantaneously responds to what happens live in the performance space – for example, if an audience member walks out, this is acknowledged and they are thanked for their attendance. These instances highlight presence as a shared time, as I discussed in Chapter One: the immediacy of the relationship between the performer and audience is elevated, heightening an awareness of the commonality of experience between spectators. Heddon notes that “[i]ntegral to the here-and-nowness of autobiographical performance is the visible presence of the performing subject – their here and nowness too” (5). Noble even cites the time beyond the performance as one which he can continue to ‘share’ with his audience: “[p]lease do get in touch with me after the show, I’m good fun to be with”. Comments such as this suggest that spectators have the opportunity to share

presence with Noble after the performance is over, and extending the boundary of the show outside the realms of the single performance hour continues to resist the reality/performance binary not only for Noble, but for the audience too.

Presence as a shared time is also a feature of Crouch's work, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Crouch attempts to acknowledge what happens to his audience, as it happens:

Performing *My Arm* in London in 2004, I had an audience member in the front row who I could see was visibly distressed. It was summer, she was wilting in the heat. When she lent forward and put her head in her hands, I asked her if she was okay. I offered her my glass of water. Someone else in the audience offered their handkerchief. [...] I am sure that, when the play began again, nothing had been lost. No illusion had been broken. Just a greater sense of ourselves had been engendered. (Crouch in Svich 215)

Crouch suggests that acknowledging the shared time and space between audience and performer reinforces the self-understanding of both. By discursively creating presence as a shared time and space in their work, Noble and Crouch contract the metaphorical and physical space between themselves and their audience members. In *You're Not Alone*, Noble uses this contracted proximity between himself and his spectators to political effect, as I shall later evince in relation to precarity.

For solo autobiographical shows such as *You're Not Alone*, there are no fellow actors, so the encounter between performer and audience is privileged. In my experience as an audience member, Noble's destabilisation of traditional audience/performer relationships served to both decrease and increase the tension of that relationship. I was alert to the possibility of interaction with Noble; however, equally, his informal tone, use of direct address and comedy reduced audience anxiety: as Caroline Heim suggests, laughter "can break down audience inhibitions" (29). In this way, Noble places the audience in a position of increased precarity – they feel both precarious (in response to what Noble may ask of them) and secure (through Noble's informal persona, and contagious audience laughter), and this works to draw attention to the content of the show which explores different kinds of precarious relationships.

5.8.2 *The presence of the visceral real*

Noble also uses the presence of visceral images to explore precarity, as this section will demonstrate. In art, abject images transform subjective experience through a focus on the

body and bodily functions and *You're Not Alone* is predominantly concerned with visual abjection. Abject images are relayed to the audience on the upstage screen which foregrounds the potential of technology to generate shocking and unexpected visual effects. As explained, the filmed images from the camera appear to be shot from Noble's perspective. The audience's identification with Noble is therefore increased: in seeing the world directly from his perspective, the audience are placed, literally, behind his eyes. This positioning of the spectators encourages them to survey the world *as* Noble, begging the question why, if at all, he might want the audience to experience these moments as he did: why are they encouraged to gaze as if through his own eyes?

To answer this question, it is necessary to describe what the audience must visually gaze at in more detail. The homemade videos are explicit and often disturbing: for instance, Noble masturbates into a watermelon; places his "ex-landlady's" toothbrush into his anus; urinates into his own mouth while naked in the bath; defecates in an empty church, and attempts taxidermy on a deceased pigeon found on the street. These extreme sexual, scatological and macabre images typify what is understood as taboo. One audience member, Helen Louise Price, commented in her blog post about *You're Not Alone* that the "content was abhorrent, distasteful but most of all affecting. I challenge anyone not to have the images imprinted on their brain" (2015). Price's critique suggests she experienced abjection, human horror at the graphic animalistic images. Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical account of the 'abject' in *Powers of Horror* (1982) elucidates:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them. [...] as in true theater, without make up or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. (2-3)

The visceral footage in *You're Not Alone* has the capacity to provoke the "loathing" and "repugnance" that Kristeva describes as characteristic of the abject, this is theatre "without make up or masks". Other reviews of *You're Not Alone* suggest similar abject responses: "outrageous" (Venables), "truly shocking" (Caird), and "grotesque stunts and images" (Fleckney).

Kristeva notes these images of horror must be rejected for survival because otherwise they remind us of bodily mortality. Noble further reminds the audience of bodily mortality through replicating – to some extent – the visceral images from the screen live on stage. In the

performance, he foregrounds his own bodily presence, and precarity, through spending a proportion of the performance nude with his genitals taped up, and he removes his clothing shortly into the show.⁷⁹ Noble's live nudity is powerful: it brings the nudity the audience see on the screen into the auditorium. Chris Goode has written extensively about nudity in performance, and notes that it is precisely because audiences may be used to seeing naked bodies on screens, that live nudity is so unsettling:

they are so unaccustomed to really looking at unmediated, unclothed bodies. Some viewers may by now be very used to seeing moving pictures of naked people on screens, but their learned experience has forced them into positions of furtiveness and embarrassment in relation to real naked humans inhabiting a constructed space with them. (124)

The visceral reality of Noble's nakedness spills over the edge of the stage and the presence of his naked body reinforces to the audience that this is a show about Noble's real life: everything will be 'bared'. Marvin Carlson suggests that using nudity to suggest the real has been a feature of theatre for some time: "the nude body has been a significant part of the theatre's fascination with the real for the past half-century" (*Shattering Hamlet's Mirror* 53). Tim Crouch also argues that nudity on stage is a powerful suggestion of the real:

when you're an actor giving your realistic all, there's nothing more undermining than performing it next to something real. The set collapsing is real. Your fellow actor forgetting lines is real. I would suggest that full nudity tips the scale of real. Actual sex is right over there, as is actual violence. ('The theatre of reality...')

According to Crouch's dictum, Noble's nudity in *You're Not Alone* "tips the scale of the real" and footage of him masturbating is "right over there". This viscerally 'real' experienced abject that Noble creates has a magnetic twofold effect: it simultaneously attracts and repels the audience through highlighting Noble's own vulnerability in relation to the audience.

Proximity to Noble's nudity highlights the vulnerability of the body, as described by Judith Butler: the "body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of these as well" (26). Jill Dolan similarly discusses "mutual vulnerability" through nudity in the performance work of Tim Miller. She states that Miller's nudity "refuses the mutual protection of the mystic gulf between stage and house,

⁷⁹ Interestingly, Noble's 'penis tuck' means that the audience never see his penis live in the theatre, only on the screen. In this way, Noble almost de-genders his live presence, suggesting himself as a malleable subject, open to new identity creation.

making spectator and the performer's mutual vulnerability part of the equation worked through in performance" (32). Butler draws attention not only to the power of the gaze in relation to the body, but also the potential for violence inherent when humans share spatial presence. As I introduced in Chapter Two, the violence of precarious proximity that Butler describes is developed from her engagement with Emmanuel Levinas' theories on the encounter with the other. Butler notes that, for Levinas, an encounter with the other's vulnerability prompts paradoxical impulses of protectiveness and aggression: "the face of the other in its precariousness and defenselessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace" (Levinas in Butler 134). In *You're Not Alone*, Noble confronts spectators with this paradoxical urge through his own nudity, which is both fascinating and intimidating in its equal vulnerability and boldness. During performances of *You're Not Alone*, I witnessed audience members shield their eyes from graphic images on the screen and Noble's live nudity, but also peek through fingers, mesmerized and unable to completely look away. This twofold response has been noted by Kristeva who argues "the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject" (5). This type of abjection, as Kristeva describes, is a cyclical force that attracts and distances at the same time. In her work on disgust, Sara Ahmed notes the "contradictory impulses" associated with this response: "disgust is deeply ambivalent, involving a desire of, or an attraction towards, the very objects that are felt to be repellent" (84). Ahmed argues it is proximity (presence as shared space) that is central to the movement of this encounter with disgust: "[d]isgust brings the body perilously close to an object only then to pull away from the object in the registering of the proximity as an offence" (85).

The sociology scholar Imogen Tyler has also noticed the connection between the abject and shared spatial presence. She argues "abjection is spatializing, in that the abjecting subject attempts to generate a space, a distinction, a border, between herself and the polluting object, thing or person" (28). Certainly, if we consider Noble's body (both live and recorded) to be the "polluting object", the vocal and physical reactions from the audience I noted during performances suggest an attempt to erect a barrier between themselves and Noble: I witnessed some spectators leave the theatre altogether – the ultimate rejection for a performer. This indicates that abjection in *You're Not Alone* is distancing; several spectators (as subjects) react to Noble through physical disassociation and this response complicates the space between auditorium and stage, especially the informal, intimate relationship Noble has attempted to establish with his audience. Kristeva argues that abjection teeters on these obscure borders: we "may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while

releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (9). This tenuous relationship between subject and object within abjection reminds the subject of their continual condition of precarity. Further, Tyler notes that central to understanding this border is abjection’s natural impulse to displacement: “the matter transformed into an object through abjection always functions as a substitute threat, rather than being a menace in and of itself” (28). Tyler refers here to Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* in which she argues that powerful feelings such as hate or disgust are usually “a series of displacements” (44) and objects “may stand in for other objects, or may be proximate to other objects” (8). If we relate Ahmed’s argument to Noble’s performance, the function of Noble’s abjection is as a *substitute* threat, rather than causing its own harm. This begs the question: what are Noble’s urine, excrement, semen, and nakedness a substitute for?

Tyler claims that disgust “is political” (24) and, with this in mind, I argue that what is unique about Noble’s work is his intention to situate himself as the *object* of the audience’s violent disgust. This intentional self-objectifying is where Noble’s performance intersects with Imogen Tyler’s development of Kristeva’s concepts. Tyler’s *Revolting Subjects* (2013) “argues for a more thoroughly social and political account of abjection through a consideration of the consequences of ‘being abject’ within specific social and political locales” (4). Tyler’s concern is to explore “what it means to be (made) abject, to be one who repeatedly finds herself the object of the other’s violent objectifying disgust” (4). Whilst Kristeva’s central focus is the subject’s response to the abject, Tyler sidesteps this position to concentrate on the consequences for the one who is made abject. As Tyler notes, within “the scholarship on disgust, there is an emphasis on the perspective and experience of the one disgusted, and the ensuing effects of this disgust” (26). However, Tyler shifts the balance to “focus on those who repeatedly find themselves (made into) the objects or abjects of stigma” (26). In *You’re Not Alone*, the audience experience abjection – they are the “one disgusted”, and Noble is the one “made into” the abject.

Tyler discusses the duality of the term “revolting” which she clarifies as both “an expression of disgust” and a description of “acts of protest and rebellion against authority” (3). The duality inherent in the meaning of this word is central to Noble’s abjection in *You’re Not Alone*. Actions and images of an extreme nature are deeply entrenched in the politics of his work, as interviews reveal: “[h]e bristles, too, when I ask if some sequences in the new show are ‘stunts’; he worries about the word for the next two hours” (Logan 2015). Rather than “stunts”, Noble turns himself into the abject; he instantiates himself as the central object

of disgust in his performance. This is in direct contrast to how other performance artists explore the abject, such as Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) or Joe Iredale's *HalfCut* (2010).⁸⁰ Rather than distancing himself from the abject response, Noble embodies pathological abjection. The physical proximity Noble shares with his audience prompts a dual response: potentially disgusted by him, but also identifying with him. Noble is the lived abject, with potential for the audience to live it through, and with, him. I contend that Noble makes himself (and the audience in turn) abject, as Tyler notes, to draw attention to “those who repeatedly find themselves (made into) the objects or abjects” (26) – in Noble's case, those lonely individuals whom neoliberal society has rejected (including Keith the Morrisons' cashier, Mohammed the takeaway owner, but most crucially, his deteriorating father in a nursing home). This is why the images on the screen encourage the audience to gaze as if through Noble's eyes: Noble provides the opportunity for a shift in perspective from feeling abject disgust, to an alignment with those who are abjected by society, in which he includes himself: “[w]ith the stuff I was doing about me in my room,” says Noble, “and seeing Dad alone and confused in a different room, and all those people in their separate little rooms, telling his story suddenly seemed really relevant” (Logan 2015). In order to further unfold this political mission of Noble's self-abjection, it is necessary to look beyond his solo acts of disgust and to study the social observations and interactions documented in *You're Not Alone*.

5.9 Precarity

5.9.1 *You're Not Alone* and societal precarity

Kim Noble's work explores existential and societal precarity, in both content and form. Noble's daily existence exemplifies precarity as a lived norm, in that he appears to lack predictability and job security. In Chapter Two, I highlighted this normalisation of precarity, drawing on Lorey who argues that “[s]hort-term, insecure, and low-wage jobs, often named ‘projects,’ are becoming normal for the bigger part of society: precaritization is in a process of normalization” (Lorey in Puar 164). Although it is received wisdom that artists are considered

⁸⁰ In *Rhythm 0*, the audience could use 72 objects on Abramović as desired while she remained passive – she was moved, touched, assaulted, cut and her own finger was placed around the trigger of a loaded gun. The short instructions also included the phrase “I am the object” (Wood). Similarly, at Theatre Delicatessen's 2010 event *Theatre Souk*, Joe Iredale performed in *HalfCut* which offered single audience members the opportunity to remove hair from Iredale's (almost) naked body (Powell). In both these examples, the performers explored the risk of their bodily proximity to the audience and allowed their bodies to become vulnerable sites of abject art. Both performers remained passive and the audience held the agency to produce the abject from their engagement with the performer's body, but unlike Noble, those performers were not the abject self-made.

to have an alternative, precarious lifestyle to the rest of society, Noble's documentation exemplifies this impression. *You're Not Alone* details the precarious existence of being an artist, through displaying haphazard footage of Noble's artistic life, which appears unplanned and lacking in clear objectives. "Another artist might come and pick it up," he worries about the dead pigeon, wryly suggesting that life is so challenging for artists that they compete over animal carcasses. To an audience member, he comments "Sir, I really need these projects", and his use of the term "projects" – as Lorey observes – implies that Noble's artistic work is formed of several small-scale enterprises, the purpose of which is unclear, even to himself: "[d]ocumenting stuff is what I've been doing for the past 10 years, really. Just recording things" (Noble in Crawley).

In *You're Not Alone*, Noble demonstrates not only that his own self-chosen employment is precarious, but also that many other contemporary occupations are too. For example, the fact that Noble's presence as an 'employee' goes unchallenged by staff and customers suggests that working conditions in B&Q are insecure and insufficiently monitored, reflecting the wider issue of job insecurity prevalent in the capitalist system. Noble's subversive insurrection against the dominant capitalist ideology of 'labour for wage' undermines this system, revealing its own instability. His unpaid 'work' in B&Q is a form of self-imposed slavery, a guerrilla internship that unmask our oppressive market-driven society.

Just as Blythe highlights the ongoing precarity of the disenfranchised youth of Hackney, Noble similarly documents the precarious existence of the lives of other people. At the end of the production, Noble compares the unstable existence of the men that his performance has documented: he describes how Mohammed's takeaway has closed down, his neighbours have moved away, and Keith has been replaced at the checkout: "everything goes, everything ends, you can't hold on to anything". The replacement of Keith and shutting down of the takeaway suggests the hegemony of economic and employment uncertainty and highlights the transient nature of contemporary existence. Further, Noble's social relationships are precarious: most are characterised by disconnection (the men he engages with either are unaware he is filming them or assume that he is actually 'Sarah'). The majority of his documented interactions are generated through screens and the way he connects with people is unpredictable. For example, he meets Jon the lorry-driver through a note he finds inside a cubicle in "Crawley services", which left a telephone number alongside the note "is your wife up for some fun?" These arbitrary and spontaneous interactions highlight the condition of cruel optimism, which Berlant terms the "impasse" (4):

[A] stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event. (4)

Berlant's description of this temporal genre of the "stretched out present" closely articulates Noble's experience of the world (5). In *You're Not Alone*, Noble engages with life in the present moment, aimlessly absorbing himself in insignificant details and fruitless projects in the hope of connecting with people ("it's important to reach out"), and clarify a world that is sometimes inexplicable. The incongruity of contemporary life is a feature of all Noble's performance works, including a post on his website blog titled 'It's Sometime *[sic]* Hard To Understand The World.' The image features a view out of a London bus window, with the following writing layered on top:

I look out of a bus window and i see a land;

Where Yoda is trying to sell me a phone,
Where a puppet meerkat wants my money to insure
a house the bank owns,
the fastest man that's ever lived is trying to sell me the internet
for a company that also runs trains to Coventry.

Last year 100,000 people were admitted into
psychiatric care in the uk and that figure now makes sense to me.

Noble's post outlines the psychological impact created by living in a capitalist society in which people are continually bombarded with illogical advertising and pressure to conform to the system of consumption. His observations highlight the absurdity of this environment – "Yoda is trying to sell me a phone" – and he undermines its accepted normality.

Throughout *You're Not Alone*, Noble not only suggests that the men he observes live similar precarious existences, but also that these existences result in feelings of isolation and claustrophobia: "Jon in his lorry, Mohammed, behind that counter, Keith, stuck behind his counter. All these men, so hemmed in", he says to the audience. At a different performance, Noble replaced the words "hemmed in" with "confined". Both these words denote a physical restriction of space, but also that the men are metaphorically "confined": restricted in their economic and class positions through pervasive societal structures that disempower their autonomy.

5.9.2 *You're Not Alone and existential precarity*

The projects that Noble engages with are clearly linked to Butler's existential precarity. In the latter half of the show, Noble explains his father has inspired his 'projects'. The audience witnesses footage of Noble asking his father what to do with his life and his father replying "[j]ust think about what you can be doing to help other people". Following this, the audience see Noble embark on the series of covert community projects. These initiatives exemplify what Butler articulates as the increased ethical responsibility to the other, after Levinas in which "the extreme precariousness of the Other" (Levinas 140) makes "moral demands to us" (131). Noble's actions imply that he feels morally bound to "help other people", as his father suggests. Noble's longing to help others is used to justify his archivist recording of them and interventions in their lives through his projects ("[t]he Bible says love thy neighbour, but how can you love thy neighbour if you don't really know them?"), and, as I highlighted in Chapter One, the archive "is to do with longing" (Steedman 81). For Levinas, the idea of longing is also central: the Other (the face) "is the other before death, looking through and exposing death [...] the face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. Thus the face says to me: you shall not kill" (Levinas in Butler 131-132). In *You're Not Alone*, Noble shows many images of his vulnerable father, which conjure images of elderly people neglected in society. His community projects, in Levinasian terms, are a response to this: the extension of responsibility from his father, out to his community. He mentions it's been "245 days since his near lifeless body was found in the street". Like the characters in Blythe's plays reacting to traumatic events, and Crouch's character of the Father reacting to the death of his daughter, Noble's actions appear to be prompted by this moment: the trauma of this experience. This also reveals the "active" (Butler in Puar 169) relationship between existential and societal precarity: Noble's feeling of responsibility to his father (existential precarity) extends to trying to alleviate societal precarity in his community.

Butler argues that a feature of contemporary life is intensified vulnerability to the other: "there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know" (*Precarious Life* xii). Noble's actions in *You're Not Alone* encapsulate Butler's understanding of precarity as vulnerable interdependency. His clandestine recordings draw attention to the vulnerability inherent in close spatial proximity to strangers, especially in urban environments. One of the key environments that Noble uses to reveal vulnerable

interdependency with strangers is the digital space. The men that he interacts with “believe anything that I say”, he tells the audience, as they witness him inform one “I’m a miner. Only part-time though”. The audience see the names of these men on the screen, photographic images of them, Facebook profile pictures, telephone numbers, as well as hearing their voices and seeing their real selves on video footage of the attempts Noble makes to meet them in person. The extensive exposure Noble gives to interactions with these men reinforces that the digital space makes it harder to determine and verify somebody’s identity, thereby unsettling the reality of that space.

Noble’s projects in *You’re Not Alone* demonstrate the potential for strangers to infiltrate and affect lives, even in ways that remain undiscovered. For example, he shows the audience a picture of a man’s feet and says he “took a photograph of a man in the cubicle next to me because it’s nice to meet people and he seemed like a decent chap”. Noble’s website reveals this is part of a wider project, ‘CLOSE UPS’: he has an entire Pinterest page of pictures of other people’s body parts, covertly photographed on public transport. The potential for our body to be photographed and recorded by strangers reflects Butler’s understanding of the precarity of the body, as existing within the public realm:

The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do.
(*Precarious Life* 26)

Noble’s work is so arresting because he reveals the lack of autonomy people have over both their social situation and their physical bodies. In *You’re Not Alone*, physical vulnerability to the Other is emphasised when Noble claims he has put anti-depressants in a water reservoir so “the people of South East London are a lot happier now”. This challenges the self-determinacy that people have over their own bodies and highlights the vulnerability and violence that bodies can be subjected to by the Other. Noble’s suggestion that he has put prescription drugs into the water system is one of a series of actions in *You’re Not Alone* that can be deemed illegal: such as, posing as an IKEA employee (“what you’re doing is definitely illegal” say the police), and stealing Keith’s underpants from his house.

The significance of Noble’s ‘illegal’ actions not only reveal human precarity in the face of the Other, but they also can be viewed as acts of cruel optimism, as defined by Berlant. In much the same way that the characters in *Little Revolution* attached themselves optimistically to community projects, Noble does the same. I contend that they are the kinds

of “political project” that Berlant suggests create a relation of cruel optimism when “the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (1). For Noble, the ‘object’ (guerrilla community acts) are impeding the aim (“help other people”), as the aim is never achieved. In *You’re Not Alone* there is no evidence of Noble’s community recognising his acts, or being improved by them, yet the “very pleasures of being inside [the] relation have become sustaining” for Noble (Berlant 2). For example, after cleaning one car on the street, he reflects that the positive feeling it gave him encouraged him to clean every car on the street. Noble engages in these actions knowing that they are obscure methods of connection that will not create the community-building that is needed. Compared to the characters in Blythe’s plays who genuinely attempt to mend their fractured communities, Noble ‘sends up’ this attempt by choosing actions that only he engages with, and is aware of, which suggests that forms of ‘togetherness’ are illusory – indeed, nostalgic – in precarious neoliberal environments. In this way, he parodies the attempts at “social recovery” that characterised David Cameron’s neoliberal idea of the ‘Big Society’, through destabilising the hegemonic order and flippantly attempting to restore his community with satiric acts (2011). Noble implies that such substitutive actions will not alleviate the unhappiness neoliberal society creates: “what does all this matter anyway?” he asks.

5.9.3 *Precarity as proximity: relationship with the audience*

In revealing his secret filming of other people and activities that affect their lives, Noble ensures that audience members are made affectively aware of their own precarious existence in relation to his. Noble plays footage of himself secretly taping whole raw chickens and taxidermy animals to audience members’ front doors, at night, following performances. He cheerfully warns he may visit more homes tonight to do the same: “I’ve got some of your names and addresses from the box office”. Whilst this suggestion could be easily dismissed as insubstantial, Noble ensures spectators feel the possibility that this may actually occur when real names and addresses of audience members scroll along the bottom of the screen, with inserted typed provocations including “let’s all head round”. This exposure of personal information is a destabilising moment, as revealed by one reviewer: “I suddenly see my own address on the screen, taken from the database of this evening's show. He’s apparently already been to my place earlier on or he will be knocking on my door later. I don’t know which, I’m too shocked” (Pickthall). This is a disconcerting reminder that there is a vulnerability attached to engagements online, including purchasing a ticket to the theatre – once the button to pay

has been clicked, the purchaser is unknowingly added to an archive of names and addresses, that Noble then gains access to. Noble uses these eradications of conventional proximity to explore the precarious interrelationship between an individual and society. Throughout the show he also randomly addresses audience members, asking them questions: at one particular moment an unexpected spotlight immediately shines on a spectator positioned quite near to the back of the auditorium and Noble asks, “Madam, have you ever killed anyone?” For an audience member, these unexpected moments remind that the show is a live interaction with Noble, and that, wherever they are sat, they may be asked to contribute at any time.

Noble also intensifies the precarious proximity he establishes with his audience through use of an audience participant. Both Crouch and Noble use participants in their performance, although Crouch’s participant is a trained actor, who has prior knowledge of their involvement in the show. Noble’s participant is an audience member, who only discovers they will be involved when they arrive at the theatre.⁸¹ When I have seen *You’re Not Alone*, I have witnessed Noble approaching these men in the foyer beforehand and asking them if they agree to be involved in the performance. However, Noble plays the moment of ‘picking them out’ as pure chance, which suggests spontaneity to the audience. Each time I have seen the show, Noble ‘chooses’ this audience member from the same seat. Presumably, the already-agreed participant is instructed by Noble, or an usher, as to which seat to sit in. Noble stops on the step next to this audience member and takes off his own clothes until Noble is wearing nothing (his penis is out of sight, taped to his thigh). Noble uses this participant constantly throughout the remainder of the hour. At times, Noble asks the participant strange questions and offers surreal comments, such as: “I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking how much I remind you of Angela Merkel” or “have you ever made love to a fruit or vegetable?” Throughout the show, Noble makes repeated signals that he wishes to go home with the man afterwards: “I’m going to ask Mike if I can go back to stay at his house tonight”.⁸²

The audience participant is from the world outside the theatre, with no knowledge of the performance structure. This means that the show will differ slightly each night, depending on the participant. The participant’s replies to Noble’s questions cannot be predicted and, on the occasions I saw the show, participants offered different responses to certain questions.

⁸¹ The use of participants in theatre can be seen as part of a broader trend of theatre, that Garde and Mumford term “Theatre of Real People”, “a mode of performance that presents contemporary people, who tend not to be trained performers”. Garde and Mumford argue that “[r]ecently socially engaged Western theatre has shown an intense fascination” with this mode (3).

⁸² I use ‘Mike’ as the name for the audience participant where necessary in this chapter, as this was the name of the participant when I saw the show at the Contact Theatre, Manchester.

Uncertainty as to the participant's answers created a shared vulnerability between Noble and the participant: the participant cannot envisage what request Noble will make him do, and Noble has no way of knowing how the participant will react. It is worth stating that all four times I have seen the show, and in all the reviews I have read, the participant has been male. I contend this deliberate gendered choice is for two possible reasons. Firstly, the show examines loneliness with a focus on masculine subjects and using a male participant offers Noble the chance to explore, live in the theatre, some of the proximities and relations he develops with his filmed subjects. Secondly, as discussed, *Kim Noble Will Die* was criticised by some for being misogynistic, so choosing a male participant could, in part, be a practical choice to avoid similar accusations.

The moment in which Noble encourages the participant to remove his shirt provides a vital shift in the dynamic between audience and performer and heightens awareness of the precarity of proximity. Witnessing a fellow member of the audience remove clothing is potentially destabilising as it sets the agenda that Noble might expect other audience members to do the same. For each spectator, their bodies are now at an increased risk of exposure, which Noble has achieved through using his own nudity and then projecting the same action on to the audience participant. The audience participant becomes a potential synecdoche for the entire audience – he has crossed from 'our' space to Noble's and any other male spectator could easily be in his place. In this way, Noble traverses a gap between audience and performer and, in doing so, encourages a greater identification with his individual embodied perspective.

The use of the participant conforms to what I term the 'logic of substitution', which I suggest is used across my case studies, as a response to precarity. In Blythe's work, characters substitute nostalgic kitsch into the gap created by precarity, and in Crouch's *An Oak Tree*, the Father transubstantiates an oak tree into his daughter – effecting a creative substitution, and Crouch substitutes an unrehearsed actor into the character. Similarly, throughout *You're Not Alone*, Noble engages in a series of substitutions, and his use of the participant is one of the most apparent. The participant is used as a substitute for the men that we see Noble interact with on the screen. For example, when Noble plays footage of his 'date' at the Southbank Centre with Dan, this is mirrored live on stage with the audience participant: a small table, two chairs, and a bottle of wine is set up as a mirror image of the image on the screen: "I've brought you the same present", he tells the participant, giving him the bottle of wine. These moments are crucial: Noble replicates live in the auditorium his precarious attempts to connect with a stranger. This moment offers an embodiment of both types of precarity I have

highlighted – Butler’s existential precarity, and Berlant’s cruel optimism. The substitutive use of the participant aligns with Butler’s articulation of an ethical responsibility to the other: “an understanding of the precariousness of the Other” (134) is created through Noble and the participant’s mutual vulnerability. The audience witnesses the vulnerability and uncertainty that they have seen between Noble and men in filmed footage, live in the auditorium. Through showing us the shared dependency between himself and his audience participant (existential precarity), Noble offers the audience a live reenactment of the relations of dependency that he reveals through his interactions with people in his local and digital community as he tries to alleviate societal precarity. Further, his desperate recreation of on-screen encounters is a clear example of Berlant’s description of the relation of “optimistic attachment[s]” which involve “a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to this thing will help you or the world to become different in just the right way” (2). The encounters with men that Noble films are scenes of optimistic fantasy, and the restaging of these scenes with the participant are a “return” to these fantasy scenes – he hopes that, with Mike, “I’m just not going to go home alone”.

5.9.4 *You’re Not Alone and cruel optimism*

Other aspects of *You’re Not Alone* clearly reveal how Noble’s performance exemplifies cruel optimism, particularly his activities in his community. For instance, he steals Mrs Cummings’ bank statements from her bin in order to put £20 a month into her account by direct debit, which he says is to enable her to be able to replace her stolen plant pots, (footage of her complaining of this is played at the start of the performance). Other activities include cleaning all the cars on the street at night, dressed as a horse, and giving awards to Mohammed, Keith, and other community figures. These types of action that Noble undertakes are can be understood as utopic because they show Noble gesture towards his vision for a better society, however obscure these gestures may be. As Jill Dolan articulates, utopia is inherently performative, relying on an imaginative airbrushing of reality to uncover new possibilities:

the idea that in order to pretend to enact an ideal future, a culture has to move farther and farther away from the real into a kind of performative, in which the utterance, in this case, doesn’t necessarily make it so but inspires perhaps other more local ‘doings’ that sketch out the potential in those feignings. (38)

The intent behind Noble's actions appears compassionate and, as Stewart Pringle stated in *Exeunt*, in "his attempts to marginally improve the lives of his neighbours [...] he's taking affirmative action in the face of the walls of conventionality (and brick) that divides him from others in his community". This type of "affirmative action" aligns with neoliberal voluntarism and David Cameron's vision for the 'Big Society': "[w]e need people to take more responsibility. We need people to act more responsibly [...] we will never crack crime [...] unless we all decide that these are our streets and our communities, and we have a role to help make sure they are safe" (2011). However, the obscurity of Noble's community actions also serves to illustrate the systemic difficulty of contributing in a constructive way to societal engagement as an individual within the neoliberal system: kindly donating £20 a month to an elderly neighbour can only be born from the illegal act of stealing. In subverting normative behaviour and creating his own rules, Noble centres himself as a vehicle for social change against the pervasive ideological neoliberal doctrine that humans are better off engaging in competitive self-interest. Noble presents an alternative and improved society – one in which the human is valued over legal and economic structures, and physical boundaries. This is revealed in Noble's work at B&Q when in response to a request by a customer, he replies: "I literally couldn't give a shit, it's *you* I'm worried about Madam, how are you doing?" In this way, Noble's anti-establishment community actions are inherently nostalgic – perhaps a longing for an imagined time when neighbours conversed across fences. They are the actions of the precariat, a figure "subject to chronic uncertainty" who is "fuelled by nostalgia for an imagined golden age" (Standing 183).

Noble's utopic acts and attempt to create a more empathetic community designate his frustration with the status quo. He asks the audience participant, "[d]o you want to change anything about yourself, Mike?" and reveals "I want to change my looks, my personality, and my physique". The nostalgic desire for a new and improved life also impacts on Noble's relation with others. On a homemade DVD, which he anonymously sends to Keith, Noble says "I like to imagine you can escape the confines of the checkout till" and hopes that "perhaps one day we can both fly away together". This suggestion draws on the fantasy superhero trope of flying into the sunset, and indeed, Noble declares "I want to be a hero Keith". The positivity with which Noble articulates his vision for change and desire for a better are suggestive of the optimistic fantasies Berlant describes: "it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project" (1). The attachments Noble creates in *You're Not Alone* – to Keith, to men on the internet, to working in B&Q, to community projects – appear unsatisfactory in their outcomes: Keith barely knows who he is, men online believe he is

‘Sarah’, he is unpaid by B&Q, and his community projects do not create any systemic change. Dependency is the central structure of instances of cruel optimism, and in *You’re Not Alone*, Noble is sustained by continual interdependency with the other, no matter the quality of these interactions. As Berlant describes, “a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat, that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming” (2). The need for these projects appears to eclipse the concern for what these projects actually are: the relation is “sustaining regardless of the content of the relation” (2). In a similar way to the characters in Blythe’s plays, Noble engages in community projects as a way to alleviate dissatisfaction with the present – both case studies illustrate Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism.

The fantasy relationships that Noble establishes with strangers and the obscure projects he engages with always risk his own exposure, as his arrest in IKEA demonstrates. In this way, Noble presents the “situation tragedy”, as understood by Berlant, which is created by the structures of neoliberalism: in “the situation tragedy, the subject’s world is fragile beyond repair, one gesture away from losing all access to sustaining its fantasies: the situation threatens utter, abject unravelling” (6). For Noble, one misplaced gesture, could shatter the fragile structure of his activities, as he highlights when stealing Keith’s underpants: “I took the second pair down so it wasn’t obvious”, and as is demonstrated by his arrest in IKEA. The connections Noble has created between himself and his subjects are so tenuous that they constantly have the potential to fracture. This is demonstrated when Noble meets a man named Dave in a York hotel room, as ‘Sarah’. Noble has invested time building an online relationship with Dave, and he embodies this fantasy: “I practiced being Sarah in the York railway museum”. However, once Dave arrives at the hotel room and sees Noble is a man in lingerie (all of which the audience see replayed on the screen), he quickly flees: “Dave legged it off down the corridor”. The sustaining fantasy of his online relationship with Dave is broken. Each of Noble’s activities operates in a similar way: his situation is a “situation tragedy” and he illuminates Standing’s precariat figure – one of fragility, of precarity, of a continual teetering-on-the-brink of disaster.

The end of *You’re Not Alone* demonstrates how the show performs cruel optimism. Noble’s optimistic desire to help other people and to increase social cohesion, prompted by the experience of loneliness (both his and those around him), does not achieve the ideal community-building he envisages. In the final minutes of the performance Noble leaves the theatre with the audience volunteer and live stream footage is played of them exiting the theatre foyer, walking hand-in-hand and mounting a real horse to ride down the street together. Meanwhile, an Orson Welles quotation is displayed on the screen: “[w]e’re born

alone, we live alone, we die alone. Only through our love and friendship can we create the illusion for the moment that we're not alone". As the quotation flashes up and Chris De Burgh's *Lady in Red* starts to play, the strangers from the audience take their positions to dance as instructed. The key word from this final quotation is 'illusion': it suggests an illusion is no substitute for the romantic, Western trope that these final images clearly mimic – the "good life" fantasy of cruel optimism. There is only the bathos of night-time Soho, a small pony, the promise of Nandos and awkwardly dancing under a glitter ball with a stranger. Through the interplay of exploring the affect of proximity and precarity in the auditorium and society, *You're Not Alone* stages the utopic promise and ultimate failure of neoliberalism and Cameron's hope for "social recovery to mend the broken society" (Cameron 2011).

5.10 Conclusion

This chapter addressed the autobiographical performance work of Kim Noble, looking especially at his show *You're Not Alone*. This analysis enabled me to reveal that Noble's work can be considered within Martin's definition of 'theatre of the real'. Further, I showed that, in common with Blythe and Crouch, Noble mobilises the archive, presence, and technology as indexical traces of the real. For Noble, technology is the most central to his practice and I illuminated how it works within his performance as a trace of the real. Noble's documented life articulates how subjects feel compelled to digitally record their existences, and play with the construction of alternative identities online. Noble's use of technology demonstrates how the relationship between the live performer and their on-screen persona suggests the images on the screen are 'more' real, in their spontaneity, compared with the rehearsed live performance. In these ways, I showed how Noble uses technology to explore and destabilise reality, and identity.

Investigating *You're Not Alone* also provided the opportunity to analyse how, in using the indexical traces, Noble explores the relationship between the real and precarity. In creating scenes of fantasy through fake identities and guerrilla community action, Noble embodies Berlant's theory of cruel optimism and draws attention to the impossibility of the neoliberal dream. Further, the use of visceral images, and precarious situation of the audience participant offers the audience a manifested understanding of abject and existential precarity. By playing with the normative order, and therefore undermining accepted realities, Noble reveals the real as contingent, and open to substitution.

CONCLUSION

CONTEMPORARY THEATRE OF THE REAL AND PRECARIETY: FROM *WHAT* TO *HOW*

Ending the show and going away also involve ceremony: applause or some formal way to conclude the performance and wipe away the reality of the show, re-establishing in its place the reality of everyday life.

- Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (189-190)

Investigative aims

This thesis has contributed towards understanding contemporary theatre of the real and its relation to precarity. The focus of this thesis was prompted by noticing that, in England, the theatrical landscape since the millennium has been dominated by theatre of the real productions. The popularity and diversification of the genre drew my attention, along with the pervasiveness of the term ‘real’ (and other similar assimilated terms such as ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’) in relation to theatre. However, I also noticed a palpable shift occurring in these productions. Practitioners seemed less interested in staging ‘what’ the real is, and more in ‘how’ to construct and suggest the real in theatre, demonstrating an enhanced self-reflexive approach.

I began my research by analysing Carol Martin’s work on theatre of the real, and suggesting that, because of the noticeable shift in this area, the understanding of the term ‘theatre of the real’ should be critiqued and expanded. In the course of my research it became evident that new examples of theatre of the real encompass many divergent aesthetic forms moving beyond the boundaries Martin set, which releases the potential to illuminate broader changes and trends in contemporary theatre. This led me to become interested in how what is understood as the real was being dramatically produced. I developed the idea of the ‘reality braid’ of archive, presence, and technology to investigate how theatremakers were using the real in their work, their dramaturgical processes, and what these processes might reveal about why there is such interest in staging the real.

The next stage of my research asked the crucial question of why this shift has occurred. My answer lay in noticing a clear connection between theatre of the real and precarity. Consequently, I have aimed to investigate what the influence of both personal and

political precarity was on the content and form of contemporary theatre of the real. I argue that theatremakers have responded to contemporary precarity by making work that highlights the insecurity of the real (the deconstructionist agreement of its contingency).

In order to investigate these questions I used a case study approach and analysed *An Oak Tree* by Tim Crouch, *Little Revolution* by Alecky Blythe, and *You're Not Alone* by Kim Noble. Each of these practitioners use different performance styles and work in separate theatrical genres (verbatim theatre, conceptual theatre, and autobiographical performance). However, despite their divergences, each use the dramaturgical 'reality braid' of archive, presence and technology in their approach to the real. My two main research methods were: a text-based approach, in which I used close-text analysis to analyse the content of the plays; and, a performance-based approach which invoked my personal experience as an audience member at each of these productions.

Summary of Research Findings

In Chapter One, I introduced my challenge to Carol Martin's definition of 'theatre of the real' and explained that, because theatre of the real continues to proliferate and diversify, there is the need to understand how what is recognised as the real is dramatically constructed. I also call for her definition to be extended to include fictional plays that explore and interrogate the real through their content and form. I revealed there has been an ideological shift in theatre of the real productions: the desire is no longer to 'get real', but to highlight the ambiguity and instability of the real. Very simply, the move has been from 'what', to 'how': the practitioners I studied are less interested in *what* the real is, or in putting forward a truth claim, but instead foreground the instability of the real on stage, whilst acknowledging the multiplicity of debates around it. I suggested that theatre of the real operates in two distinct modes: the intradiegetic real, and the extradiegetic real. I also analysed the concepts of the archive, presence and technology and situated them as 'indexical traces of the real'.

If Chapter One considered 'what' is happening in contemporary theatre of the real modalities and debates, Chapter Two answered the question as to 'why' certain trends are emerging. Through using the events of 9/11 and the 2007 – 8 financial crash as examples, I showed that, throughout 2000 – 2018, political, economical and existential precarity has taken hold as a key societal narrative, and that the destabilisation of reality and identity that characterise precarity has led to the increased proliferation of theatre of the real productions and forms. I introduced theories of precarity, particularly focusing on the work of Judith

Butler and Lauren Berlant who articulate two different theories of precarity – personal and political – that are inextricably linked. This chapter placed focus on Lauren Berlant’s idea of cruel optimism in which people maintain attachments to things they believe will improve themselves or the world, despite abounding contradictory evidence that the promise of this object will actually materialise. Related to this, I explored ideas of utopia and nostalgia, explaining how past and future-orientated affects are bound together with cruel optimism.

My three case study chapters on Tim Crouch, Alecky Blythe, and Kim Noble show that, despite belonging to diverse aesthetic categories, each is an example of theatre of the real and use the archive, presence, and technology as indexical traces of the real. There are some common practices in the process of mobilising indexical traces in theatre, including using original sound recordings and documentary footage (archive/technology); making the script visible on stage (archive/technology); authors performing in their own plays and using participants (presence); and, using recording devices and headphones to rehearse and construct shows (technology/archive). Each of these is intended to point towards the real for an audience.

My research into Crouch and his play *An Oak Tree* demonstrates that, for Crouch, presence is the theatrical route to the real. In Chapter Three, I demonstrated that Crouch destabilises presence – of performer and objects – as a way to call for a more conceptual understanding of the real through discursively performing and dematerialising the real, rather than ‘presenting’ it mimetically. I explained how his use of presence in *An Oak Tree* is intricately supported by the archive and technology, all of which work together as a ‘reality braid’ in his work. I analysed how Crouch’s work has developed from conceptual art practices and suggested ‘conceptual theatre’ was the most useful term to articulate his theatre practice. Crouch explores existential and interdependent precarity, as understood by Judith Butler. I indicated that, through the form of his plays and dramaturgical choices, Crouch affectively creates precarity for an audience in order to offer them an embodied understanding of the content of his work. In particular, I cited the inclusion of an unrehearsed second actor as the main way in which Crouch encourages his audience to make the same perceptual shifts that the characters in his play also make. In doing so, the audience receive an embodied understanding of how precarity alters the experience of reality.

Blythe’s play *Little Revolution* demonstrates that, for Blythe, the archived voice is the theatrical route to the real. In her plays, she archives the voice and, in doing so, troubles the notion of what voice actually is – both aesthetically and politically. *Little Revolution*, as I explored in Chapter Four, is a more self-reflexive form of documentary theatre that questions

and deconstructs its process and position from inside the play itself – achieved mainly through Blythe’s presence as an actor in the play, playing herself and also through Siva’s shop acting as a metaphor for the theatre. I argued her plays are an example of post-traumatic English kitsch theatre, which explore communities dealing with precarity, and that both what the plays articulate and attempt can be seen as cruel optimism. The promise of a community healing itself, and the promise of the voice as the route to the real, do not live up to these expectations. In this chapter, I showed that the consideration that theatre of the real can be an antidote to precarity, or offer a cathartic experience following a tragedy, is an example of cruel optimism because the promise of what this political project can achieve is often greater than the outcome.

The final case study of this thesis was Kim Noble and his production *You’re Not Alone*. Analysis of this solo autobiographical piece demonstrated that, for Noble, technology is the indexical trace of the real, allowing him to replay actual events from his life, and inhabit different identities. In a similar way to Blythe, Noble’s work explores the idea of the attempt to restore fractured communities. However, unlike the residents in Blythe’s plays, Noble operates by himself outside the state system, ‘sending up’ the idea of communitarianism through playful activities. In this way, he shows how community-building and other forms of ‘togetherness’ are not possible in the precarious neoliberal sphere – attempts at them are revealed to be cruelly optimistic. Like Crouch, Noble uses the form of his work, and dramaturgical choices such as the audience participant, to provide the audience with an embodied understanding of the precarity that the content of his work explores.

In summary, productions of theatre of the real have increased as practitioners attempt to find ways to interrogate, deal with, and erase the precarity created by what can be termed a new “age of anxiety”, after W. H. Auden’s expression to articulate the period following the Second World War (102). Each of my case studies engages with the condition of precarity, which powerfully occurs during or after a traumatic event (or is just a condition of the neoliberal everyday). What happens in these instances is that reality and identity become destabilised – a feeling of security in what people had come to know as reality is lost. The focus of contemporary theatre of the real has shifted from ‘*what to how*’ as a response to the impact of existential and societal precarity on our collective senses of the real. This is more complex than the “growing number of reflexive performance techniques” that Carol Martin highlights, as the work made (whilst self-reflexive) is less concerned with challenging the nature of the real (Martin, *Theatre of the Real* 9). Although recent contemporary theatre of the real does seek to encourage “multiple viewpoints” and perspectives on reality in order to

interrogate it, I have noticed that it also works to create an affective and embodied understanding of the destabilisation of reality (precarity) for its audience (Martin, *Theatre of the Real* 9). The indexical traces of the real (archive, presence, and technology) are the ways in which practitioners construct and destabilise the real on stage. Through using the indexical traces of the real, practitioners explore the process of substitution: something is substituted into the gap created by precarity. As precarity has destabilised reality and identity, attempts are made to find an alternative real to deal with this loss. I have shown that this attempt is often nostalgic, and cruelly optimistic in form. In many ways, this is no far leap from Martin's claim that theatre of the real "identifies a wide range of theatre practices and styles that recycle reality", it is just that the act of substitution shows an audience the process of 'recycling reality' from *within* the performance itself, rather than the recycling being part of an external dramaturgical process (Martin 9). The broad term that I have created for how the real operates in contemporary theatre that exemplifies this shift is the 'extradiegetic real' and this thesis argues there has been a dramaturgical shift in theatre of the real from the 'intradiegetic real' to the 'extradiegetic real'.

Having summarised my work, there remains the question of what the outcome of this research for future scholars is, and what the legacy of this new shift in theatre of the real might be.

Contemporary theatre of the real: what next?

My research seeks to open out a continuing conversation, rather than close it, not least because all three practitioners studied are all still making work. Crouch is still touring *An Oak Tree* internationally, and, in 2018, made a new piece of work – *Beginners* – for the Unicorn Theatre, which featured child performers and considered the perceptual experience of being a child, an adult, and an animal. He is currently working on a BBC2 comedy about post-Brexit Britain with Toby Jones, *Don't Forget The Driver*. Although Blythe's last play was *Little Revolution* in 2014, she is making a new piece of work for the National Theatre and indicated to Simon Stephens that she wants to do "more work in film and TV" and that these mediums require "a pacier story", so therefore she is "taking baby steps to fictionalise within the nonfiction" (Blythe in Stephens). Perhaps, Blythe has reached the limits of verbatim – as Anna Deavere Smith writes, "[i]t's only natural that we would look to the real to find... fiction" ('Oh, but For a Fool' 192). Kim Noble also co-devised a piece of work for the Unicorn Theatre in 2018 – *Wild Life FM* – which featured a cast of nine young musicians

playing music and discussing their lives, and this production is now internationally touring. The interest of Crouch and Noble in producing work for young people suggests that, over the next few years, there may be an increase in work for young people that explores the real in an extradiegetic way. The continued output of the practitioners I have considered indicates the potential for future research to chart the development of the indexical traces of the real throughout their work.

I have focused on three English practitioners, but this cannot be taken as an indication that every English theatre of the real practitioner uses these indexical traces of the real, or works in the ways described. However, in Chapter Three I demonstrated the unique correlation between English nostalgic sentiment and the cruelly optimistic desire to substitute something into the gap created by precarity. These substitutions occur both in the content and form of the case study performances under consideration, and I showed that there is an especially English propensity for kitsch nostalgia to combat times of crisis. Unfortunately, there was not the space in this thesis to analyse cases from across the whole of the United Kingdom, or to look at examples more globally as a comparison and I hope this study serves as a foundation from which other scholars can investigate examples from other global areas.

This study has contributed to the field of contemporary theatre research as the first piece of extended research to analyse the relationship between theatre of the real and precarity. Whilst other scholars have offered important contributions in either theatre of the real studies, or theatre and precarity studies, there has not yet been research that connects these two areas, and my thesis has addressed that gap. Scholars may have noted a shift in theatre of the real, but my work is the first to address the reasons for that shift in connection to precarity. Not only has my thesis provided new readings of *An Oak Tree*, *Little Revolution*, and *You're Not Alone*, but it has also offered significantly different interpretations of thinking about the work of Crouch, Blythe, and Noble. It is also the first considerable research that considers the work of Noble.

In this current time, the lines between reality and fantasy continually blur and all areas of life seem punctured by precarity. Theatre has responded by offering embodied understandings of the insecurity that surrounds us. My thesis therefore lays a foundation for future scholarship which investigates these three significant artists, and also considers how theatre of the real more widely might respond to precarity.

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