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# Authenticity and Representation: Council Estate Plays at the Royal Court

Council estates, otherwise known as British social housing estates, have been subject to media scrutiny since their inception, and widespread criticism of social housing remains a prominent feature of British Welfare State discourse. In recent media coverage, for example of the 2011 riots, these spaces remain central to discussions of class, economics, and crime in the UK. This article draws on postcolonial theory to explore contemporary representations of the council estate on the Royal Court stage – with a focus on narratives of ‘authenticity’. Here, two plays, *Off the Endz* (Agbaje, 2010) and *The Westbridge* (De-lahay, 2011), are studied to assess how narratives of authenticity work in theatrical representations both to reinforce and to resist popular impressions of council estate spaces. Charlotte Bell is a PhD candidate in the Drama Department at Queen Mary University, where she is currently writing her PhD thesis on the urban social housing estate and the contemporary cultural economy. Katie Beswick is a Research Associate in Applied Theatre at the University of Leeds, where she has recently completed her PhD on the representation of the council estate in theatrical performance practices.

THE COUNCIL ESTATE has been the subject of popular, academic, and government enquiry almost since the wide-scale inception of social housing. It is often mobilized in arts practices as a key site through which social issues including poverty, urban criminality, mental health, race relations, youth aspirations, and citizenship are explored. Glance at any newspaper, TV schedule, or popular music channel and you will not wait long before being confronted with the image of the archetypal, brutalist council estate.

The council estate regularly features as the setting for popular representations on music videos (*Council Estate of Mind*, Skinny Man, 2004; *Council Estate*, Tricky, 2008); in film (*Tyrannosaur*, 2011; *Ill Manors*, 2011; *The Estate Film*, 2011); on television (*Shameless*, 2004–13; *Top Boy*, 2011 and 2013; *Run*, 2013). Recent theatre concerned with the council estate includes mainstream productions such as Philip Ridley’s *Mercury Fur* (Paines Plough and Theatre Royal, Plymouth, 2005); adaptations such as Moika Grit’s production of *Romeo and Juliet* (2010), and applied and community drama practices such as SPID (Specially Produced Innovatively Directed)

Theatre Company’s *23176* (2008) and *Sixteen* (2009). Often these representations contain narratives that highlight negative attributes of estate life; usually (as in all of the cases cited above) the estate is presented as a site of crime, poverty, and youth violence.

This article explores how the represented council estate has been framed as ‘authentic’ at the Royal Court Theatre in London, through the lens of two recent productions: *Off the Endz* (Bola Agbaje, 2010) and *The Westbridge* (Rachel De-lahay, 2011). In these plays, authenticity is invoked through claims to lived experience and empirical understandings of place. In *Off the Endz*, both Agbaje’s and lead actor Ashley Walters’s experiences of living and working in London council estates became a key lens through which the production was mobilized, not least through marketing. In *The Westbridge*, the appropriation of a physical feature of the landscape into the ‘fictional estate’ of the play troubled and blurred understandings of the lived place and the place-myth.

In both cases, south London council estates, and in particular the North Peckham estate, were visible and invisible, not there

and not-not there. As discrepancies between the richest and the poorest are increasingly played out through housing and access to it, these productions raise important issues for understanding estate spaces in contemporary London and the UK.

For several reasons the Royal Court is a prime site through which to examine the tension between received and performed representations of 'authentic' estate experience in contemporary performance. Firstly, the Court is positioned by a number of scholars and social commentators as a key venue for staging performances of national relevance.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the theatre has a long history of social-realist engagements with the British council estate, including seminal plays such as John Arden's *Live Like Pigs* (1958) and Andrea Dunbar's *The Arbor* (1980). More recent productions have included *Redundant* (Leo Butler, 2001), *Flesh Wound* (Ché Walker, 2003), *Fallout* (Roy Williams, 2003), *Gone Too Far* (Agbaje, 2007), and the foci of this article, *Off the Endz* and *The Westbridge*.

These theatrical representations focus on the lived experience of growing up or living on an estate; they are often positioned as a political response to the wider discourse surrounding council estate representation. For example, Agbaje has proposed that her plays offer a voice to those young people traditionally denied a platform in public discourse.<sup>2</sup> Finally, and most centrally in terms of our focus in this article, a majority of the Royal Court's council estate productions have been written and developed with and by artists who have personal experience of living or working on council estates. Authenticity, therefore, acts at multiple levels of the performance process.

This poses problems: the 'authenticating' position risks contributing to a slippage in which the estate 'on stage' is understood as grounded in claims to 'the real' at the levels of production and reception, contributing to oppressive imaginings of council estate spaces and residents. Attention to the postcolonial and material relations between maker, site, and performance event provide a method through which the distinctions between

lived experience, authenticity, and representation can intervene politically in the 'place myths' of council estates.

### Place Myths and the Council Estate

'Council estate' is a term that usually refers to large-scale social housing projects that are iconic features of the UK's urban landscape. The council estate is a form of British social housing – usually comprising a mixture of houses, maisonettes, or tower blocks, most of which were built during the mid-third of the twentieth century – both as a result of slum clearance programmes in the early part of the period, and, after the Second World War, as a result of housing shortages caused by the widespread bombing of major cities.

Estates comprise state-subsidized properties, normally for rent, intended for those members of society who cannot afford to buy or rent a home through the private sector. However, as social geographer Anne Power states, 'this simple proposition causes far more complications and problems than it may seem', particularly as many estates are now of mixed tenancy: residents can now own their property, rent through the private sector, or rent through the social housing sector.<sup>3</sup> Because of these complexities 'social housing' is a term that has gained currency in the last two decades, reflecting shifts in management and administration.<sup>4</sup>

While the terminology for state-subsidized housing has changed to reflect the infrastructures that support these homes, 'council estate' remains a popular term in much social discourse. Therefore, we refer to estate-based state-subsidized housing as 'council' housing throughout this article.

Alison Ravetz has noted 'there can be few British people unable to recognize what is or is not a council estate', suggesting that there is a shared identity to these places.<sup>5</sup> While we acknowledge their collective identity, it is important to note that individual council estates contain specific and distinctive characteristics. 'Council estate' remains a contested term.

The methodological approach to a majority of artistic engagements with the council



The Aylesbury Estate in Southwark, south London. Although this estate is not the focus of this article, its aesthetics bear similarities to modernist estates across the UK built in the mid- to late twentieth century. Photo: Charlotte Bell.

estate, particularly those at the Royal Court, is ethnographic and autobiographical. Such methodological engagements are not in themselves problematic. However, Kevin Hetherington argues,

maps, photographs, paintings, televised images, textual descriptions, poems and so on. . . . They arrange, order, include and exclude, they *make knowable* a space to everyone who might choose to look at these representations and also make it possible to compare it with another space. . . . Those representations contain truth claims (not necessarily scientific) about a space. They *perform place myths* as places.<sup>6</sup>

The council estate is subject to numerous place myths due to its representation in a variety of media and particularly due to negative press coverage that contributes to the council estate and its residents' reputation as 'lacking'.<sup>7</sup> In particular, as demonstrated in the wake of the 2011 UK riots (discussed in more detail below), the media

has increasingly aligned urban council estate spaces with gang violence – a narrative in which young black males are particularly implicated.

In 2005 the address by David Cameron (then Leader of the Opposition) to delegates at a symposium 'Thugs: Beyond Redemption?', which popularly became known as the 'hug a hoodie' speech, aligned criminality with youth boredom in estate spaces. As Bell suggests, the word 'hoodie' (a vernacular term for a hooded sweatshirt – a key piece of urban street fashion) has racial connotations and has become a derogatory signifier for urban youth crime, often leveraged to support increased surveillance and policing.<sup>8</sup> The council estate is regularly mythologized as intrinsically poor, criminal, and dangerous. It has also served as an intersectional space where concerns relating to race, class, and gender are played out. Claims to 'authenticity' in performance negotiate and play into popular discourse myths.

## The Role of Embodied Knowledge

Our critique of the methodological implications of performance making and productions about estate spaces necessarily calls for meditation on the appropriate methodological tools researchers of such works employ. A preference for embodied knowledge in the production of performance works suggests that theatrical representations of council estates are necessarily socially engaged. Although we cannot go into detail here, the lived experience as an authenticating act often extends into the analysis and interpretation of socially engaged work, particularly about or in estate spaces. Participant observation is a prevalent methodology. However, relying on such research methods can be problematic. Stuart Laing notes that the correlation between authors' experience of the represented environment and the supposed authenticity of performance is characteristic of social realist drama. Discussing Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (Theatre Royal, Stratford East, 1958) Laing argues that:

the double guarantee of authenticity through the combination of *personal knowledge and close observation* suggested the equation of artistic success with truth to social detail. In the language of 'social exploration' the working class were an unknown community ('another country' as Anderson put it) needing investigation.<sup>9</sup>

Here, we focus on the 'personal knowledge' aspect of Laing's argument. Just as modes of production might facilitate a slippage between the 'real' and the 'represented', so too privileging the embedded researcher might result in privileging those who can claim direct experiential knowledge of the production or performance. Dwight Conquergood points to the tension between embodiment and text as interpretative methods in post-colonial ethnography, claiming that 'textocentrism – not texts – is the problem'.<sup>10</sup> While Conquergood suggests that performance scholars do 'challenge the hegemony of text', prioritizing the lived research experience of performance can risk replicating some of the problematic (colonial) hierarchies Conquergood attributes to text.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the socially engaged remit, access to cultural activities is neither simple or straightforward. There is important analytical work to be done in understanding socially engaged practices from a postcolonial and materialist perspective. As white women, neither of whom are currently estate residents, we use the council estate space as a lens through which to explore the intersectional issues of race, class, and gender in the inner city. We are particularly interested in the ways that council estate residency works as an authenticating frame in theatrical performances that claim to represent 'real life'. The lived experience as an authenticating act has the potential to lead to theatrical productions operating as totalizing narratives of council estate space. Such a slippage is particularly problematic in productions that offer representations of familiar, often stigmatizing, council estate narratives.

## Authenticity at the Royal Court

There are various ways in which the term 'authenticity' might be understood. For the purposes of clarity, this article takes two conceptions of authenticity as central to its analysis. The first involves the relationship between art and authenticity, which has, as César Graña highlights, been a recurring theme in the Western philosophical tradition.<sup>12</sup> The second involves the relationship between authenticity and cultural exchange.

Graña traces the philosophical concern with authenticity from Plato through to the late twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> He notes that the concept of artistic authenticity has long been connected with ideas of mystical revelation, or of the artist-as-vehicle through which 'ultimate meanings' are revealed:

We do not say that art 'invents the "reality" for which it "speaks"'; that reality, the doings of life, exists, of course, before and beyond the artistic image. But we believe art is capable of making *visible* certain ultimate meanings which are present in ordinary events but which remain hidden in them until they are, in fact, reborn in their full spirit within the work of art.<sup>14</sup>

Graña acknowledges that the philosophical concern with truth as revelation of 'ultimate



meanings' is beyond the scope of a sociological enquiry, but does note that a sociological enquiry can usefully

make the *connection* between the intricate circumstances of a given moment in social time and the revelation of those circumstances by the exalted manifestation of their expression.<sup>15</sup>

The revelation of the circumstances of the 'given moment' of the estate is bound up in a contemporary concern with notions of art and the authentic, where it is perceived that a stage representation might be capable of representing the authentic totality of estate experience. However, contemporary notions of authenticity are no longer primarily concerned with a mystical revelation of 'reality' but more closely related to postcolonial concerns regarding the ethics of representation, ownership, and authorial subjectivity.

Accusations of *misrepresentation* have been central to late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century understandings of postcolonialism, and have been most obviously applied to theatre in relation to intercultural performance practices. Rustom Bharucha critiques the work of theatre practitioners including Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski, particularly its 'interculturalism': the use of Indian 'cultural material' (literature, ritual, exercises). He asks whether the theatrical 'interculturalism' taking place in the West can be viewed as cultural exchange or, because of the complex history surrounding cultural exchange between the East and West, whether more intricate ethical considerations need to be addressed. For Bharucha, the historical power imbalance between India and the West means that cultural exchange between the two parties will always be contentious.<sup>16</sup>

### Council Estate as Cultural Experience

The council estate constitutes a specific cultural experience of the UK. Therefore, the performance of these spaces in culturally prominent theatres such as the Royal Court might be considered a kind of '*intraculturalism*' (emphasis added). Bharucha defines '*intraculturalism*' as 'those exchanges within,

between, and across regions in the larger framework of a nation'.<sup>17</sup> Intracultural debate will necessarily involve different tensions than those critiqued by Bharucha in *Theatre and the World* in relation to *interculturalism*. Nevertheless, the spatialization of class in the UK is produced through contentious systems of representation and discourse. In this system, a (liberal historical) alliance between citizenship and belonging, which depends upon property ownership and claims to nationalism, is heightened through and by contemporary neoliberalism.

The 'gap' between estate residents' earned income (as opposed to income received through benefits, tax breaks, or allowances) and outgoings (in real terms) is reconfigured by neoliberal discourse as an 'ideological' gap that is attributed to levels of active social participation. As a result, existing power structures and deeply problematic stereotypes are reinforced. At the same time, the postcolonial discourse regarding representation has undoubtedly filtered into wider social consciousness. Postcolonial debates have expanded beyond concern with the representation of colonized nations to encompass the representation of those myriad minority groups whose voices are silenced by social, economic, and political systems.

In the theatre, particularly at institutions such as the Royal Court with an agenda to 'widen participation', the focus on providing a 'voice' for the under-represented stems, in part, from the absorption of postcolonial discourse into the mainstream. The Royal Court's writing programmes, for example, contribute to narratives of authenticity reinforced by the material conditions of the productions. This is particularly visible in their 'Unheard Voices' scheme, a free eleven-week writing course centred on participants' identification with a particular ethnicity: for example, the 2013 programme 'What's Your Sheeko?'<sup>18</sup> was designed for writers of Somali descent.<sup>19</sup>

Implicit and explicit claims to authenticity at the Royal Court have included reference to the personal experience of playwrights and performers in publicity material, their emergence from the 'Unheard Voices' scheme,

attention to social detail in stage design, and the co-opting of real spaces into the fictional stage space. This co-opting of real space includes the 'Theatre Local' initiative, which has seen the theatre produce plays in 'alternative spaces' – in parts of London often considered socially, culturally, and economically disadvantaged.<sup>20</sup> The programme has included productions at a disused shopping unit in Elephant and Castle, south London; a two-year residency (2011–12) at the Bussey Building (a former factory) in Peckham, also in south London; and in 2013 at the Rose Lipman Building, a community arts centre in Haggerston, north London.

In Black and Feminist Studies, the weight placed on representations of marginalized groups has been referred to as the 'burden of representation'. This burden of representation exists wherever a marginalized group is represented because, as Stoddard and Marcus have pointed out, political movements that have called for wider representations of the marginalized have always presumed that a person or group is capable of speaking on behalf of other people or groups.<sup>21</sup> The 'voice' given to under-represented groups in the context of the Royal Court is often operationalized via notions of 'authenticity', in which the 'reality' of the stage representation is evoked.

In the analysis of the two council estate plays that follows, *Off the Endz* and *The Westbridge*, we consider how the evocation of authenticity through text in performance and the embodied knowledge of artists called upon in the marketing of the productions, implicates these performances in a 'burden of representation'.

### From Margins to Mainstream

*Off the Endz*, performed in 2010 at the Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, the larger of the Royal Court's two performance spaces, is set on an unnamed council estate. The play addresses issues including race, criminality, and the lasting impact of 'home' on identity.

The narrative follows David Damola, a recently released criminal who has returned to his childhood estate in order to live with

and be supported by his friends Kojo and Sharon, a couple who are struggling to pay off debts while saving for a deposit on a mortgage and aspiring to a life away from the estate (or 'off the endz').<sup>22</sup> When Kojo loses his job, as a result of cutbacks following the economic recession in 2008, David convinces him to form a partnership selling drugs. The plan backfires when Kojo is shot by a gang of pre-teen drug dealers incensed that David is dealing on 'their' estate.

The play was written by Bola Agbaje, a Black British woman who grew up on the North Peckham estate in south London and, during the play's creation, worked as a housing officer for a social housing provider. The Royal Court's emphasis on Agbaje's first-hand experience of the estate in promotional material for the production meant that the work was subject to an increased 'burden of representation'.

Rachel De-lahay's *The Westbridge*, directed by Clint Dyer, premiered at the Bussey Building – Theatre Local Peckham – from 3 November 2011, before transferring to the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court from 25 November. As De-lahay's first play, it was conceived when she attended the Royal Court's young writers' programmes for Black and Asian writers, 'Unheard Voices' (supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation), and won the 2010 Alfred Fagon award for playwrights of African and Caribbean descent.

Finalized in the weeks following the urban riots of 2011, the play, which ran for about ninety minutes, is set in and around the fictional Westbridge Estate in Battersea, south London. It follows the lives of its residents over a period of two days in the aftermath of riots, sparked by the accusation that a black teenager (Andre) has raped an Asian girl. The 'burden of representation' was complicated here by the fact that the production, although ostensibly about a fictional site, referenced real estate spaces at both the sites where it was performed. The council estate is pivotal to the action and the identities of the Black male protagonists of both *Off the Endz* and *The Westbridge*. In both instances, young Black male protagonists

(David and Andre) *return* to their childhood estates – David following his release from prison, and Andre because ‘it’s home. Ain’t full of nothing but family.’<sup>23</sup>

### ‘Beyond Politics’?

According to Nick Couldry, the contemporary neoliberal agenda has removed the ‘social’ from the ‘political’: the act of speech from a marginalized position is an inherently political act, but also operates ‘beyond politics’. He argues that an operation ‘beyond politics’ is essential if ‘voice’ is to resonate within the multiple social contexts existing outside formal political structures.<sup>24</sup>

De-lahay’s *The Westbridge* is framed within discourses of invisibility due to its emergence from the writers’ programme titled ‘Unheard Voices’. This invites connections to be made between De-lahay’s race, assumed socio-economic status, and the content of her play. De-lahay comes from Birmingham; however, an assumption concerning her embodied knowledge of inner city London might become cemented as the writer, who lives and works in the capital, is increasingly aligned with low-income status.

In order to be a full-time playwright De-lahay (whose income is sporadic) works in line with an income that is equal to that of the London minimum wage.<sup>25</sup> De-lahay publicizes this in order to contribute to wider campaigns emerging across the cultural sector concerning increasing cuts to arts funding, and to highlight the precarious conditions many working in the cultural industries negotiate. Her campaigns frame her work as political narratives of visibility and invisibility.

Similarly, Agbaje’s position as a thrice-marginalized playwright – a Black, working-class woman with an embodied knowledge of council estate spaces – allows a framing of her work within Couldry’s paradigm. Thus these writers’ voices operate both as political acts and as acts ‘beyond politics’. This is because they work in a society where inequality pervades in terms of race, class, and gender, and, importantly, because they address issues relating to race, class, and

gender in their work, which takes place in a public space. However, whilst Agbaje’s and De-lahay’s work has been performed in popular and well-established venues such as the Royal Court, and might be considered part of the mainstream, in many ways they and their work remain ‘periphractic’.

David Theo Goldberg proposes that the ‘periphractic’ inner city creates a relational experience of the city space, one that

does not require the absolute displacement of persons to or outside city limits, to the literal margins of urban space [but] merely entails their circumscription in terms of location. . . . In short, periphractic space implies dislocation, displacement, and division.<sup>26</sup>

The council estate, as a feature of this periphractic space, circumscribes individuals through a process of ‘dislocation, displacement, and division’, and such divisions filter into the theatre space. In 2012 the Royal Court hosted a screening of the documentary *From Margins to Mainstream* in the Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. Commissioned by the Octavia Foundation, this project trained young people as researchers and filmmakers who collaborated with Black British artists to produce a documentary on the history of Black British theatre.<sup>27</sup>

Although it was positioned as an event celebrating the movement of marginal practices into the mainstream, this well-attended event was disrupted on more than one occasion: the fire alarm unexpectedly went off twice (on the first occasion many started to leave the building), and loud on-site construction work interrupted the hour-long film. These instances served as an uncomfortable reminder of what Graña describes as the ‘intricate circumstances of a given moment in social time and the revelation of those circumstances by the exalted manifestation of their expression’.<sup>28</sup>

### Issues of Spatial Politics

We do not suggest that the Royal Court deliberately interrupted this screening; however, the lack of preparation, particularly in considering the timing of building works,

suggests that the marginal has yet to be integrated into the mainstream fully and productively. The smooth staging of an event designed to promote and celebrate the successes of Black British artists demanded a struggle against the wider practices of an institution that was, nevertheless, framing itself as a space from which to celebrate and support those successes.

A closer look at the spatial politics of the Royal Court's 2011 production of De-lahay's *The Westbridge* draws attention to the marginal, or periphractic, position that both representations of the urban council estate by young Black British artists continue to negotiate. Performed at both the Bussey Building, Peckham, as part of 'Theatre Local' and at the Royal Court – located, of course, in fashionable Sloane Square – the 2011 production offers a microcosm of the relations between the performance event and the site of performance, calling notions of authenticity into play.

In Peckham, an area with a reputation for economic and social deprivation, there appeared to be an assumed relevance for a local audience of this representation of young urban life, particularly in the wake of the 2011 summer riots.<sup>29</sup> In Sloane Square, an exclusive area frequented by the upper-class elite, a sense of authenticity was evoked by the fact that the fictional Westbridge Estate on stage referenced a 'real' estate located in Battersea, an area of London lying on the opposite bank of the River Thames from the theatre.

In both instances the play referred to 'real' spaces. Although Sloane Square might more readily be considered a 'commercial' venue, the spatial relations inherent in the production were also inherent to the central theme of the play: what does 'belonging' mean and how is it understood in a multicultural city such as London? In many ways, the production at Sloane Square acted on the specifics of its locality in ways similar to those site-specific works produced beyond conventional theatre spaces. Considered together, these two productions of *The Westbridge* make visible Bharucha's concept of 'intraculturalism', promoting 'exchanges

within, between, and across' economically and politically distinct areas of London.<sup>30</sup> However, this intracultural exchange does not, in this instance, dilute the problematic power relations that exist beyond the theatre venues. In both cases, the *representation* of place became significant to the *site* of performance: its similarities and shared identity as 'inner city' at Peckham and its stark contrasts in architecture and demographics at Sloane Square.

### Slippages: the Real and the Represented

Conceived during De-lahay's participation in the Royal Court 'Unheard Voices' writers' group, *The Westbridge* was originally titled *SW11*. This initial title situates the action within the specific postcode area of Battersea in south-west London and references a growing 'moral panic' about the proliferation of 'postcode gangs' in London and urban areas across the UK.<sup>31</sup> However, despite referring to a fictional estate, the title eventually chosen for the play, *The Westbridge*, corresponds more closely to a fixed locality, particularly as the play is explicit in locating the action within the Battersea area.

Westbridge Road is the main thoroughfare that connects Battersea Bridge Road (and access to London north of the Thames) to the central commercial area of Battersea, which centres on Vicarage Crescent. This road divides two council estates: the Surrey Lane estate and the Doddington and Rollo estate. Both estates comprise a mixture of tall tower blocks and mid-rise buildings, and have appeared in news media as sites of high-profile criminal activity, particularly armed robbery and drug-related crime. While the geographic and architectural specifics of this area might not be common knowledge, the similarities between the name of the fictional estate, the play's setting in Battersea, the real Westbridge Road, and the location of a large 'problem' estate in that area of London seem intentional acts of spatial fixing.

These coincidences invite comparisons between the specifics of represented place, the physical environment of Battersea, and the site of performance. Most troublingly,





Scenes from *Westbridge*: Above: Andre on bike with his mother Audrey, behind (Ryan Calais and Jo Martin). Below: George (Daisy Lewis) and Soriya (Chetna Pandya). Photos: Keith Pattison.



they create slippages between the fictional site of the performance and the real sites they reference.

The 2011 production was staged in the round. However, it was the audience who were placed in the centre, seated on chairs positioned at awkward angles to each other. This meant individuals had to twist and turn in order to view the action being performed on the raised walkways that surrounded them on four sides. This directorial and scenographic decision might create a sense of entrapment and enclosure. Yet, despite being surrounded by the action, the spatial politics of the production also invited a preoccupation with the space beyond the performance venue: invoking 'authenticity' through reference to 'real' spaces.

At Peckham, the raised walkways seemed to reference the nearby North Peckham estate (infamous for its overhead walkways, removed in the wake of Damilola Taylor's high-profile death on the estate in 2000). At Sloane Square the proximity of Battersea across the River Thames invited spectators to make connections between the stage representation and the physical 'real' space across the river. Thus the Westbridge Estate that forms the focus of De-lahay's play is both visible and invisible. It is simultaneously located in a recognizable landscape and 'othered'. It is both not-there and not-not-there.

Key moments in the play in which the specifics of place are debated highlight the geographies and cartographies of London and its periphractic spaces, real and imagined, visible and invisible. In one drunken exchange, George (in her twenties, white British) and Soriya (in her twenties, mixed race white-Pakistani) discuss Soriya's Black British boyfriend Marcus, and the racial and class politics of place:

SORIYA: You're such a snob!

GEORGE: And you're the ghetto queen that brought the hood rat into my bachelorette pad.

SORIYA: Marcus is not a hood rat. He's from Clapham!

GEORGE: Clapham Junction! There's a difference!

SORIYA: And where do you think you live?

GEORGE: South Chelsea?

SORIYA: Hate to break it to you, SW11, same as those from the chicken-eating estate.

GEORGE: Ugh! My parents really really hate me don't they?<sup>32</sup>

This moment calls attention to hierarchies of place that dominate understandings and experiences of living in London. Young British Black and Asian men were framed as being representative of young British Black and Asian men 'over there' on the 'chicken-eating estate'. While this moment offers a (we suggest harmless) stereotyped critique of a young (upper) middle-class white woman, it does little to challenge and meet the burden of representation of estate residents, particularly young Black men. A White Chelsea is understood in opposition to a Black Clapham, despite the fact that these inner-city areas have a shared history of gentrification, most notably during the 1980s. This contributes to problematic imaginings of council estates occupied by the kinds of criminal, immoral residents often depicted as archetypal estate tenants.

### Slippages in *Off the Endz*

Similar troubling slippages are revealed in the publicity material that accompanied the Royal Court staging of Agbaje's *Off the Endz*. This material highlights that the problematic relationship between representation, 'authenticity', and perceptions of reality is often manifest in the slippages between the fictional representation and the lived experience of artists involved with the work.

Agbaje's 'authenticity', as a former council tenant and housing officer, was emphasized in the promotion of the production and the accompanying education resources. Her interview with the *Metro*, which foregrounds her relationship to the council estate, is included as the first item in the *Off the Endz* resource pack – a collection of documents about the production which the Royal Court makes available online for use in an educational context.

As the resource pack's contents remain unframed, they exist on the website as performance documentation. While they might

provide useful classroom stimulus, and while Agbaje's background knowledge of the council estate environment does position her as a legitimate voice through which this environment might be represented, the framing of her experience is problematic. This is because the mediation of that experience into the fictional form of a play is not similarly highlighted. In fact, the authenticity of the onstage representation is further emphasized in interviews with the cast and crew; the director, Jeremy Herrin, suggests that his own *lack* of knowledge of the council estate did not affect the authenticity of the production, because 'most of the actors came through a very similar social situation as the characters, you know, grew up on estates'.<sup>33</sup>

Further slippages between the real and the represented are revealed in the publicity material surrounding the fictional main character, David, and the actor who played him, Ashley Walters. An emphasis on the similarity between character and actor means that the distinctions between the stage fiction of David and the real figure of Walters become increasingly blurred. Like Agbaje, Walters grew up on the North Peckham Estate; he is an actor and musician who came to prominence as a member of the hip-hop collective So Solid Crew in the early 2000s.

After serving a custodial sentence for possession of a firearm he has appeared in a number of films (such as *Bullet Boy*, 2004; *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*, 2005; *Anuva Hood*, 2011) and television programmes (including *Hustle*, 2004; *West LDN 10*, 2008; *Top Boy*, 2011), often depicting a criminal, urban landscape which parallels the life of drugs, crime, and money that was central to his So Solid Crew persona, 'Asher D'. In publicity for *Off the Endz* Walters featured prominently. His pre-show interview in *Great British Life* was promoted on the Royal Court's website detailing the context of the production, and Walters drew clear parallels between David's criminality and his own criminal past:

I've been David. David is angry and anyone who tries to help him, he puts down and pushes away. Then I went to prison and I got to know myself



David Damola (Ashley Walters) in *Off the Endz*.  
Photo: Joahn Person.

better, which is rare – not a lot of people are rehabilitated in prison, they actually become worse because they're with other criminals, many of whom consider crime a career, and prison just becomes part of the process.<sup>34</sup>

During this interview Walters also positioned himself as the authentic 'other' in a myriad of the 'white middle-class' actors he trained with:

I started going to Sylvia Young's, where the rest of the kids were white, middle-class. I'd go to their four-storey townhouses, and then back to my flat in Peckham, but rather than be jealous, I thought about how I could achieve that myself.<sup>35</sup>

Walters also featured as the central image for the play's promotion: a close-up of his face imposed upon the backdrop of a (generic) modernist council estate. The slippage between Walters and David is created in performance too, as characters repeatedly refer to the ways in which their environment impacts them. In this way, the performance risks becoming an essentialising narrative to

be read by the audience as a 'real' representation of the estate environment.

Agbaje's relationship to 'the endz' is complex. The playwright has publicly acknowledged that *Off the Endz* draws on her own experience of the estate environment. Furthermore, in publicity for the production she stated that David was based on her brother. This further conflates the representation offered in the play with the 'real'. The 'double' authentication suggests that the representation on stage is not only a recognizable reality, but also the revelation of an authentic 'council estateness', as suggested by Herrin in the resource pack interview, in which he states that Agbaje's writing is 'authentic'.<sup>36</sup> The conflation between the real and the represented risks encouraging a reading of the play as an authentic and total representation of estate experience.

Criticism to this effect was levelled at *Off the Endz* before its opening by journalist Lyndsay Johns, who argued that 'the theatre of the ghetto' is limiting in terms of the breadth of Black British experience it is able to reflect.<sup>37</sup> It is not only the Black British experience that is problematically bound up with the fictional narrative of *Off the Endz*, *The Westbridge*, and others, so too, the spatialization of the performance, the presentation of problematic 'estate space' within the social domain of the Royal Court, encourages a 'typicalization' of council estate space as the space of the 'other'.

Because *Off the Endz* overlooks the quotidian experience of council estate life and focuses instead on the kinds of sensational behaviours that have come to be understood as the essence of 'council estate' experience, it does not meet the burden of representation which a play about the contested spaces of day-to-day family life, so marginalized in dominant discourse, might properly bear. The Royal Court's appropriation of Agbaje and Walters's 'authenticity' in marketing and promotional material troublingly resonates with Bharucha's criticism of cultural appropriation in *Theatre and the World*. Just as the power relations between the West and the rest make cultural exchange fraught with ethical dilemmas, so too the marginalized



Kojo (Daniel Francis) and David (Ashley Walters) in *Off the Endz*. Photo: Joahn Person.

position of council estates in British social history means representations of these spaces within prominent and potentially elitist spaces of British cultural activity will necessarily be contentious.

### Representing Crime on the Council Estate.

Walters's success as an actor suggests a far richer and more complex life than that demonstrated by his portrayal of David in *Off the Endz*. However, the uncomfortable parallel between Walters's public persona and the criminal, opportunistic behaviour of the character encourages a reading of the 'typical' young, Black, council estate male, which essentializes the estate experience. This representation reinforces problematic conceptions of estate residents by appropriating and decontextualizing Walters's personal experience as part of the play's narrative.

The following scene takes place after the audience witness a group of pre-teenage 'gangsters' threaten David with a gun. David and Kojo discuss the 'endz', and the ways

this space is mediated by increased aggression and violence from young people ('youts') on the estate. There is a sense of unease; both David and Kojo are on edge, although David covers this with a kind of nonchalant bravado.

KOJO: You don't know what those youths can do.  
 DAVID: They are exactly that. YOUTS! THEY CAN'T DO SHIT.  
 KOJO: Kids today ain't the same like when we were young. Didn't you see they had a gun?  
 DAVID: It wasn't real. If it was they would have used it.  
 KOJO: That's what I'm saying. Is that what you want your ending to be? I'm not sure if we need to be getting involved in this stuff. Maybe we do need to sit down and think this thing through again.  
 DAVID: Stop crying, man. They can't touch us.  
 KOJO: Don't you watch the news and stuff? These kids will take it far.  
 DAVID: If they want to take it far I'll take it further.  
 KOJO: You're not a kid.  
 DAVID: AND I'M NOT SCARED OF ONE EITHER. That the problem with today. We're too scared of our own children. They lucky I



never took one of them and put it on my lap,  
got my belt and whooped the shit out of them.  
Them toy soldiers can't do nothing bout I need  
to get off the endz. *Bruv, I am the endz.*<sup>38</sup>

This exchange echoes the popular belief that there is a correlative relationship between the council estate environment and the supposed 'pathological' behaviour of estate residents.<sup>39</sup> The characters' cycles of criminal, ostensibly immoral behaviour (spiralling into debt due to unwise spending habits, involvement in crime, misogyny, violence), are behaviours often associated with estate residents. The exchange between David and the gang, and the above exchange between David and Kojo, take place on the basketball court of the estate. In the 2010 production the walls of the estate were covered in graffiti, echoing the dilapidated urban space so often evoked in popular representations of the inner city.

The short speech David gives at the end of the conversation above is particularly telling; his assertion, 'I am the endz', serves to highlight his criminal credentials and ability to navigate the immoral, pathological landscape of the council estate environment. However, it might also be interpreted as a statement about Walters himself, whose public persona embodies many of the negative qualities often associated with estate residents.

### The Estate as Reified Space

The council estate has become a form of social categorization and economic classification. The racial politics of representations of council estate spaces in popular discourse are emphasised by the binary configuration of black/white. McKenzie argues that the council estate is a reified space, where residents are implicated in the 'stigmatizing properties' with which it is associated.<sup>40</sup> Shifts in the media representation, social perception, and in government policy surrounding social housing provision, have resulted in confused, almost mythic, understandings of who constitutes a council tenant in popular representation.

This is compounded by political rhetoric. For example, following the 2011 summer riots

Westminster Council released a press statement, which the council's cabinet member for housing, Jonathon Glanz, supported, stating:

Social housing is a privilege, not a right, and as such we will look to evict social housing tenants convicted for criminal behaviour during the riots. . . . They are old enough to be responsible for their eviction.<sup>41</sup>

The implications inherent here are increasingly troubling, particularly as this press release came before the identity of rioters had been fully established. Glanz's statement implies that council estate residents were central actors in these criminal disturbances.

The role of estate residents in the 2011 summer riots was referenced throughout Dwyer's 2011 production of *The Westbridge*. The opening sequence of the production frames young Black urban men through discourses of criminality. Although not scripted, at both venues *The Westbridge* opened with instances of mugging and rioting that alluded to the events of summer 2011.

A young white woman (whom we later see as George), audible to the wider audience, asks somebody next to her if they have seen her handbag. When they reply 'No' the woman panics and races for the exit as the house lights plunge the studio space into darkness. On one level, this is a theatricalized announcement to the audience to keep their belongings safe and, as reviewers have noted, 'emphasizes the need to be on high alert in the world of *The Westbridge*'.<sup>42</sup> However, its seamless transition into the next moment reproduces problematic relations between the young Black urban man, the council estate, and the inner city.

The sound of sirens and smashing glass cut through the space as young Black men (and women playing men) in dark hooded tops, their faces covered by scarves, entered on to the platforms from different sides. The lights were low, sparked by flashes that rendered their figures into silhouettes. They moved quickly: one man was punched to the floor; another stabbed in the stomach. These adjacent scenes – the first in which a young white woman is a victim of crime, the second



a fight scene between 'hoodies' – invites the emergence of a politically problematic reading of the inner city and council estates as sites of Black youth violence that is characteristic of 'council estateness'.

In both examples discussed, the estate space remains one of periphrastic experience which does little to facilitate a productive intracultural exchange at the level of performance reception. In both, possession and dispossession of household objects, particularly more luxurious objects such as flat-screen televisions, were caught up in a troubling alignment with criminality. In *Off the Endz*, for example, Sharon and Kojo's flat was depicted as stylish and luxurious with a fitted kitchen and wide-screen television. While these elements of scenic design worked to challenge stereotypical renderings of the poor, dilapidated council estate, the plot (in which Sharon and Kojo were stuck in a spiral of debt) called the trappings of consumerist capitalism into question. Their possession of these items, which were clearly beyond their financial means, highlighted the troubled, fractured space that estate residents negotiate.

In *The Westbridge* the fact that the audience were placed in the centre of the acting area meant that the spectators occupied the space that normally focuses the gaze. Yet despite occupying a position of potential visibility, spectators were encouraged to look out, through and beyond other audience members, effectively excluding themselves from critical observation.

## Conclusion

The works of Agbaje and De-lahay offer important case studies through which to view the complex concept of 'authenticity' in theatrical representations of the council estate and its residents. Carol Martin, in her book *The Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, poses several questions about the relationship between the real and the represented in contemporary performance culture. She asks:

Can we definitively determine where reality leaves off and representation begins? Or are

reality and representation so inextricable that they have become indiscernible?<sup>43</sup>

Agbaje's and De-lahay's work is part of the history of council estate representation on the Royal Court stage, and can be read as problematic representations of authentic estate experience. In *Off the Endz* and *The Westbridge* the troubled slippages between the real and the represented were compounded by the personal, authentic, lived experience and the sites of performance, which both fed into the writing and were used to promote the production.

On the one hand, Agbaje and De-lahay can be understood as part of the institution of the Royal Court and so failing to meet the 'burden of representation' by repeating dominant, negative images of the urban inner city in their plays. On the other, however, through their commitment to engaging with the inner-city *beyond* the Royal Court, they might also be considered as playwrights acting to widen the visibility of marginalized places and to use their work to critique the 'burden of representation'.

The works of these young Black women emerged alongside the Royal Court's 'Theatre Local' residencies at Peckham. In an area of south London where the white British element of the overall population stands at just over eighteen per cent, and statistics show that the Black minority ethnic population stands at just over fifty per cent, the production of work by Black female playwrights is, in many ways, a welcome initiative.<sup>44</sup> Since *Off the Endz*, Agbaje's work has been staged at Theatre Local Peckham (2012) and the Albany in nearby Deptford (2013); De-lahay's work has been staged at the Southwark Playhouse, and she has worked with young people through STEP (Southwark Theatre and Education Partnership) and at the Ovalhouse (2013).

Agbaje and De-lahay's engagement with the inner city extends to their online activity through social media networks such as Twitter and Instagram. Here, they participate in ongoing dialogue and support for young artists in the London area. For example, Agbaje's tweets on Peckham

Theatre's production of *Othello* at Bussey building (February 2013) and both her and De-lahay's tweets about *Port* at the National Theatre (2013) provide another lens through which the council estate and its theatrical representations are negotiated beyond the geographical boundaries of both the inner city and the theatre building.

Theatre practices have an ethical responsibility to meet the burden of representation by offering diverse conceptions of estates. This is due to the marginalized and periphrastic position of the council estate in contemporary society and the impact of such representations on the lives of residents. This is particularly the case in nationally significant theatres such as the Royal Court, where the dissemination of the content of productions beyond the immediate audience (including through and beyond the academy) means that the content of the work is part of a national discourse, and so has the potential to challenge or intervene in dominant conceptions. However, as Bharucha reminds us,

myths have to be studied not only in performance contexts but through the diverse ways in which they have been received by people from their childhood through stories, anecdotes, proverbs, mythological films, and calendar art.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore we suggest that researchers must, similarly, offer diverse methodological approaches to analyses of estate spaces and places. The presence of Agbaje and De-lahay and their work with and *beyond* the Royal Court, and their continued dedication to engaging with the contested spaces of the inner city, might, then, ensure that the Royal Court's presence in areas like Peckham does not contribute to the area's potential development as culturally periphrastic. Their continued interaction helps to draw attention to the place myths in which theatre inevitably operates. Through processes of intraculturalism they are engaged in important ongoing dialogue regarding the periphrastic spaces into which they are circumscribed by and through their work.

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