



UNIVERSITAT DE
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The Performance of Racial and Gender Terror in debbie tucker green's *ear for eye* (2018) and Travis Alabanza's *Burgerz* (2018)

Elisabeth Massana Vidal

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UNIVERSITAT DE
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Departament de Llengües i Literatures Modernes i d'Estudis Anglesos

**The Performance of Racial
and Gender Terror in debbie tucker
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Alabanza's *Burgerz* (2018)**

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To the women who have made me and the queen(r)s who have sustained me.

A la memòria de la Mercè Prats Costal, la meva àvia.

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Abstract

This PhD thesis, entitled “The Performance of Racial and Gender Terror in debbie tucker green’s *ear for eye* (2018) and Travis Alabanza’s *Burgerz* (2018)” contributes to the field of theatre studies by analysing how debbie tucker green and Travis Alabanza’s plays engage with contemporary forms of racial and gender terror respectively. By applying a queer methodology to text-based theatre, the aim of the thesis is to offer non-hegemonic approaches to the analysis of terror in post-9/11 British drama by looking at two plays which do not traditionally find themselves within the theatre on terror corpus. Alongside the plays, it discusses material produced by the playwrights and which expands the scope of each particular project, both temporally and in terms of their aesthetics. This includes the filmed version of tucker green’s *ear for eye* (2021) and sound and video recordings of Alabanza’s *Tranz Talkz*, a series of conversations held in parallel to the creation of the play with various gender non-conforming people throughout the UK.

The thesis is organized in two acts, each of which is followed by a short interval. Act One provides the theoretical and methodological frameworks of the thesis. Firstly, drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Rustom Bharucha and Sara Ahmed, it looks at the effects and affects generated by the hegemonic epistemological framework of terror that emerged after 9/11, and it offers a brief overview of how studies on theatre and terror(ism) (Boll, 2013; de Waal, 2016; Hughes, 2007, 2011; Soncini, 2016; Spencer, 2018) have engaged with it, contributing, perhaps inadvertently, to the perpetuation of this frame. Secondly, drawing on the work of Hannah McCann, Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz and Sara Ahmed, amongst others, it drafts a scavenger queer methodology which is used to distort the aforementioned framework, slide into queer disorientation and propose a series of key methodological principles and keywords used in the analysis of the two plays, including queer temporalities, queer messiness, and a focus on aspects of livability and

worldmaking. The first interval that follows provides a justification as to what are the benefits of approaching an analysis on contemporary forms of terror through a queer lens.

Attending to their own particular contexts, Act Two analyses *ear for eye* through the lens of racial terror and locates how *Burgerz* discusses forms of gender terror, focusing on how, through its different aesthetic and dramaturgical devices, the plays engage with the principles and keywords previously identified. Some of the formal aspects analysed are elements of Afrodiasporic aesthetics in tucker green's play and the use of the archive as an act of radical communal care in *Alabanza*. The final interval interrogates how the discomfort experienced by white and cisgender audience members watching these plays can be (messily) discussed in ways which are not complicit with the hegemonic frameworks that silence these forms of terror, and with forms of epistemic violence towards the racialized and gender non-conforming subjects the plays discuss.

Overall the thesis contributes towards expanding the language used to discuss the representation of terror on stage, it proposes a queer methodology for text-based drama that can be applied to the analysis of other plays, and it offers the first available analysis of both the play and the filmed version of *ear for eye*, as well as the first discussion of *Burgerz* alongside the archived material of *Tranz Talkz*, some of which is transcribed and included in a final annex.

Resum

Aquesta tesi doctoral, titulada “The Performance of Racial and Gender Terror in debbie tucker green’s *ear for eye* (2018) and Travis Alabanza’s *Burgerz* (2018)” contribueix al camp dels estudis teatrals mitjançant l’anàlisi de la interacció de formes contemporànies de terror racial i de gènere amb les obres de debbie tucker green i Travis Alabanza. Mitjançant l’aplicació d’una metodologia queer al teatre de text, l’objectiu de la tesi és oferir enfocaments no hegemònics a l’anàlisi del terror en el drama britànic posterior a l’11 de setembre, a partir de dues obres que tradicionalment no es troben dins del corpus teatral del terror. Paral·lelament a les obres, l’estudi analitza material audiovisual que amplia l’abast de cada projecte en concret, tant temporalment com pel que fa a la seva estètica. Això inclou la versió filmada d’*ear for eye* (2021) de tucker green i l’enregistrament de so i vídeo de *Tranz Talkz* (2018) d’Alabanza, una sèrie de converses celebrades en paral·lel a la creació de l’obra amb diverses persones dissidents de gènere a tot el Regne Unit.

La tesi s’organitza en dos actes, cadascun dels quals va seguit d’un breu interval. El primer acte proporciona els marcs teòrics i metodològics de la tesi. En primer lloc, a partir del treball de Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Rustom Bharucha i Sara Ahmed, s’analitzen els efectes i els afectes generats pel marc epistemològic hegemònic del terror que sorgí després de l’11-S, i s’ofereix una breu visió general de com estudis sobre teatre i terror(isme) s’hi han relacionat (Boll, 2013; de Waal, 2016; Hughes, 2007, 2011; Soncini, 2016; Spencer, 2018), contribuint, potser de forma involuntària, a la perpetuació d’aquest marc. En segon lloc, a partir del treball de Hannah McCann, Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz i Sara Ahmed, entre d’altres, s’elabora una metodologia queer (“scavenger queer methodology”) que s’utilitza per distorsionar l’esmentat marc, transitar cap a la desorientació queer i proposar una sèrie de principis metodològics i paraules clau utilitzades en l’anàlisi de les dues obres: temporalitats

queer, desendreçament queer i un enfocament en aspectes de l'habitabilitat del món i la creació de móns. El primer interval que segueix proporciona una justificació sobre quins són els beneficis d'abordar una anàlisi de les formes contemporànies de terror des d'una mirada queer.

Atenent als seus propis contextos, l'acte segon analitza *ear for eye* a partir del concepte de terror racial i *Burgerz* a partir del terror de gènere, centrant-se en com, a través dels seus diferents dispositius estètics i dramàtics, les obres es relacionen amb els principis i les paraules clau anteriorment identificats. Entre els aspectes formals analitzats sobresurten elements de l'estètica afrodiaspòrica en l'obra de tucker green i l'ús de l'arxiu com un acte radical de cura comunitària a Alabanza. A l'interval final s'interroga com el malestar que experimenten els membres del públic blanc i cisgènere que veuen aquestes obres es pot discutir (desendreçadament) d'una manera que no sigui còmplice dels marcs hegemònics que silencien aquestes formes de terror, ni de formes de violència epistèmica cap a les persones racialitzades i dissidents de gènere sobre les que tracten les obres.

En conjunt, la tesi contribueix a ampliar el llenguatge utilitzat per discutir la representació del terror a l'escenari i proposa una metodologia queer per al teatre de text que es pot aplicar a l'anàlisi d'altres obres teatrals. Així mateix, ofereix la primera anàlisi disponible tant de l'obra com de la versió filmada d'*ear for eye*, així com la primera discussió de *Burgerz* juntament amb el material d'arxiu de *Tranz Talkz*, part del qual ha estat transcrit i s'inclou en un annex final.

1. Introduction

1.1. Preliminaries and Objectives

This study has its origins in a conversation I had with my supervisor many years ago. After having supervised my Master's Thesis on the work of Mark Ravenhill through the lens of queer studies, he suggested post-9/11 British theatre as a starting point for my PhD. The temporal marker recommended contained multitudes I was unaware of, behind which a central concept, terror, was lurking. This lurking was sustained by the growth in publications analysing the performance of terror on stage (Boll, 2013; de Waal, 2016; Hughes, 2007, 2011; Soncini, 2016; Spencer, 2018), as well as the work of researchers in performance studies and artists such as Horit Herman Peled, who claimed that

[t]he catastrophic events of 9/11, 2001, constituted an historical turning point at the heart of the triumphant neo-liberal West, and exposed in a dramatic fashion its paradoxes and contradictions. Terror, in all of its manifestations, came to be seen as a rampant menace to personal security. (2007, p. 32)

In the initial stages of research, and taking into consideration the temporal marker I was working with, it felt almost natural to identify terror solely with post-9/11 terrorism and its aftermaths – the ‘war on terror’, Iraq, Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay detention centres, the Madrid and London bombings – a connection intensified by a narrative that, according to Dolores Resano, presented 9/11 as “an unprovoked aggression with traumatic and worldwide implications and a necessary response as war” (2017, p. 5). This early approach not only left unexamined other possible meanings of terror, but also failed to question how terror was being defined, and what were the consequences of these definitions. Additionally, this was an approach that inadvertently reproduced the hegemonic grammar of the post-9/11 terror narrative, which shaped the political responses to the attacks. Was it possible that other forms of terror existed other than those I was encountering in the texts I read for research? Were these forms being obscured by the omnipresence of a single narrative?

A point of inflection occurred upon reading the work of Adriana Cavarero, in particular, her etymological analysis of the word terror. In her work *Horrorism. Naming Contemporary Violence* (2011), Cavarero draws on the etymology of terror, from the Latin verbs *terreo* and *tremo*, both of which containing the root *ter*, which indicates the act of trembling. In turn, she reminds us that these derive from the Greek verbs τρέμω (*tremo*) or τρέω (*treo*) which refer “to fear not as a psychological dimension but as a physical state” (Chantraine as cited in Cavarero 2011, p. 4). This succinct etymological study allows Cavarero to conclude that “terror is characterized by the physical experience of fear as experienced in the trembling body” (2011, p. 4). Her conclusion, which links terror to the concrete trembling body, led me to question the extent to which other forms of contemporary terror, not necessarily linked to the events of 9/11 and its aftermaths, could be explored through a focus on the body. Simultaneously, it raised the question of what kind of bodies – experiencing diverse forms of terror – were being excluded from contemporary discourses on terror and its theatrical representations.

Later in her work, Cavarero sketches a very brief history of terror which, following political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, is connected to the emergence of the state. Paraphrasing Hobbes, Cavarero uncovers how “when modernity commences [...] to reflect in a specific matter on terror, it includes it among the political categories that structure and stabilize the commonwealth” (2011, p. 80).¹ In this context – and considering the aftermath of the French Revolution – terror becomes “not just legitimate but necessary [...] a category—respectively foundational and generative—of the state” (*ibid.*). This notwithstanding, Cavarero identifies how, in the second phase of modernity – the period that witnesses the birth of liberal democracies – terror is displaced so that the state can free itself from it. As she puts it:

No longer appealing to the liberal-democratic state, terror has turned into the perverse mark of regimes that are neither liberal nor democratic, or else it has

¹ In this context, commonwealth needs to be understood in its definition within political theory, that is, as an organized political community.

relocated to a different realm altogether: it now coincides with the violence, labelled irregular—as well as inadmissible and hence criminal from the point of view of the holder of the legitimate monopoly of it—of those who attack the state. And the word for these is “terrorists”, exponents of a use of terror defined as totally illicit, morally execrable, and politically incorrect. (2011, p. 81)

The displacement of terror from the realms of the state, to the hands of those who attack it contributes towards the lexical birth of the term terrorist, which paradoxically is devoid of a fixed definition. Faced with this, she focuses on the differences between ‘state terrorism’ – defined as states who deploy “an extreme use of collective violence combining large-scale killing with various forms of planned degradation of the human body and human dignity” (2011, p. 82) – and terrorism against the state – defined as the use of terror “by individuals or groups, generally clandestine, who want to bring down whatever political form is in place” (2011, p. 83).² Zooming in on contemporary forms of terrorism, Cavarero proposes a new term, horrorism, which she sustains, manages to contain and explain how attacks such as 9/11 can no longer be defined by the terms available to us. While a further analysis on the implications of this productive neologism and its ramifications go beyond the scope of this thesis, the distinction made by Cavarero in the discursive analysis that leads her to it provides a blueprint for one of the premises of this work. In particular, I want to further stress how the distinction made by her, which identifies forms of state terrorism with examples antagonistic to liberal democracies, contributes towards removing terror from the possible strategies used by these democracies, and, as such, towards obscuring the existing forms of terror upheld by the state. In order to do this, I shall turn briefly to the work of Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe.

In his now influential essay “Necropolitics”, Mbembe identifies how “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the

² Examples of such state terrorism provided in the book include Nazi Germany, the Soviet regime under Stalin, Maoist China, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, Pinochet’s Chile or Khomeini’s Islamic Republic in Iran.

capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (2003, p. 11), “who is *disposable* and who is not” (2003, p. 27; emphasis in original). The concept of sovereignty he draws upon is traced back to modernity and is based on the distinction between reason and unreason, and the privileging of the former. Based on this, Mbembe sustains that

it is on the basis of a distinction between reason and unreason (passion, fantasy) that late-modern criticism has been able to articulate a certain idea of the political, the community, the subject [...] Within this paradigm, reason is the truth of the subject and politics is the exercise of reason in the public sphere. (2003, p. 13)

This aligns with arguments already presented by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) where he emphasized how the modern project, and its privileging of reason, led towards the classification of racialized subjects as unreasonable, and as such, as less than human, which provided colonial and state powers with the justification necessary to enslave and kill them. Following this, what Mbembe proposes is to dislodge sovereignty from the dichotomy of reason / unreason and instead understand it as the right to kill (2003, p. 16). This is exemplified by the strong connection between the rise of modern terror and the enslavement of the plantation system, which he describes as “the first instances of biopolitical experimentation”, the consequence of which is the expulsion of the enslaved from humanity altogether (2003, p. 21). The crude conditions endured by the enslaved population of the plantation – where their lives were regulated by violence – were aimed at instilling terror. In this case, a form of terror directed from the state to the enslaved. While some could argue that this form of state terror disappeared with the abolition of slavery, one of the questions I articulated after reading Mbembe was the extent to which this was the case. Is it possible to discuss other forms of terror, directed towards the racialized population, which are upheld by the state? Have these been examined in contemporary studies of terror and 21st century theatre?

A third source that allowed me to question the ways in which terror was being interrogated was Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004). In her feminist revision of Marxist historiography – in particular of how the concept of primitive accumulation was defined by neglecting the importance of reproductive labour – Federici revisits the moment of transition from a feudal to a capitalist system, and concludes that the emergence of capitalism – and as such, of modernity – was possible because the commons were privatized. Together with this, feminized bodies were expropriated so that women would carry out unpaid reproductive labour that would guarantee the necessary labour force for the productive system. Those feminized bodies deemed rebellious or dangerous for the capitalist / modern project were punished and executed as part of the 16th and 17th centuries Witch Hunts, defined by the author as a “state sponsor terror campaign” (2004, p. 63). As per Federici, one of the consequences of the unleashing of this terror campaign against women was the emergence of a new model of femininity: “the ideal woman and wife – passive, obedient, thrifty, of few words, always busy at work, and chaste” (2004, p. 103). Considering this, was it possible that other forms of terror against feminized bodies were being unleashed in the 21st century? Continuing or perhaps renewing the terror campaign that gave birth to the configuration of the capitalist system? The initial questions raised by these readings, some of which were certainly too broad to be approached in a theatre studies thesis, provided me with the basis to interrogate the word terror in its contemporary uses, and cross-examine how these have been applied to the study of theatre on terror.

Simultaneously, I began to read, perhaps rather anxiously, Sara Ahmed's work, which includes a series of books where she follows words around, “in and out of their intellectual histories” (2019, p. 4).³ In these texts, Ahmed looks at the philosophical history of three particular concepts – happiness, wilfulness and use – and in each case she crucially looks at “how the word is exercised, rather like a muscle, in everyday life”

³ These include *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), *Wilful Subjects* (2014) and *What's the Use?* (2019).

(ibid.). Even if I did not explicitly set myself to replicate Ahmed's method, to a certain extent this thesis has been following terror around through its less trodden paths within theatre studies, as well as within the particular worlds each of the analysed plays looks at. Terror in this sense becomes one of Ahmed's 'sweaty concepts', which are generated "by trying to describe something that is difficult" (2017b, p. 12). Ahmed connects these concepts to the body and concludes that a sweaty concept "is one that comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world [...] a description of how it feels not to be at home in the world, or a description of the world from the point of view of not being at home in it" (2017, p. 13). As such, and taking the questions that the reading of Cavarero, Mbembe and Federici raised, in this thesis I follow two forms of terror which affect bodies that are not at home in the world, and which are not part of the hegemonic narrative of terror in place during the first two decades of the 21st century, aimed at racialized and gender non-conforming people: racial and gender terror.

1.2. Distortion: The Theatre on Terror Corpus

This thesis focuses on the analysis of racial terror in debbie tucker green's *ear for eye* (2018) and gender terror in Travis Alabanza's *Burgerz* (2018). The publication of a series of monographs dealing with theatre and terror between 2013 and 2018 has resulted in the establishment of an unofficial but still recognizable corpus of plays that have been analysed as part of the representation of contemporary forms of terror on stage in Boll, 2013; de Waal, 2016; Hughes, 2007, 2011; Soncini, 2016 and Spencer, 2018. These include, in chronological order: Henry Adams's *The People Next Door* (2003), Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo's *Guantanamo* (2004), Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* (2004), David Hare's *Stuff Happens* (2004), Colin Teevan's *How Many Miles to Basra* (2004) Dennis Kelly's *Osama the Hero* (2005), Mimi Poskitt and Ben Freedman's *Yesterday Was a Weird Day: Reflections on July 7th 2005* (2005), Mark Ravenhill's *Product* (2005), Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* (2006), Caryl Churchill's *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006),

Simon Stephens's *Motortown* (2006), Lone Twin's *Alice Bell* (2006), Jonathan Holmes's *Fallujah* (2007), Nicolas Kent and Richard Norton-Taylor's *Called to Account* (2007), Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot / Get Treasure / Repeat* (2007), Simon Stephens's *Pornography* (2007/2008), Roy Williams's *Days of Significance* (2007), Howard Barker's *The Dying of Today* (2008), Adam Brace's *Stovepipe* (2008), Youssef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* (2008), Steve Gilroy's *Motherland* (2008), David Hare's *The Vertical Hour* (2008), Alia Bano's *Shades* (2009), Atiha Sen Gupta's *What Fatima Did...* (2009), Nicolas Kent's devised cycle *The Great Game: Afghanistan* (2009), David Greig's *Dunsinane* (2010), DC Moore's *The Empire* (2010), Mike Bartlett's *13* (2011), Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's *Belongings* (2011), Richard Norton-Taylor's *Tactical Questioning: The Baba Mousa Inquiry* (2011), George Brant's *Grounded* (2012), Owen Sheer's *The Two Worlds of Charlie F.* (2012) and Hayley Squires's *Vera Vera Vera* (2012). A couple of notable exceptions of plays which engage with forms of terror distant from the post-9/11 terror narrative, which are analysed in more than one monograph include Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (2009) (Soncini, 2016, p. 29), as well as the inclusion of verbatim pieces *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005), edited by Katherine Vines and Alan Rickman (Soncini, 2016, p. 89) and Robin Soans's *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) (Soncini, 2016, p. 124), dealing with the killing of pro-Palestinian activist Rachel Corrie and the Northern Ireland Troubles respectively. Despite the addition of the last three plays, what the texts in the list provided have in common is that they directly engage with the events of 9/11 and its military ramifications, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as other terrorist attacks made in the name of Al Qaeda, such as the 7/7 bombings.⁴

One of the aims of this thesis is to distort this corpus by looking at two plays which, as has been mentioned, deal with other forms of terror: racial and gender. The term distort is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the action of distorting, or condition of being distorted, or twisted awry or out of shape. The twisting or perversion of words so as to give to them a different sense; perversion of opinions,

⁴ See Sara Soncini's annex in her study *Forms of Conflict: Contemporary Wars on the British Stage* (2016) for a comprehensive list of plays responding to 9/11 and the 'war on terror'.

facts, history, so as to misapply them” (2022). As this definition shows, and as has been highlighted by Stephen Greer, distortion tends to carry a negative association. However, Greer suggests that looking at distortion through a queer lens can lead to new forms of thinking (2022). To reach this productive conclusion, Greer looks at queer as a verb and traces its French and Latin roots, where to queer means to question or enquire; as such, he understands the act of queering as “a deliberate act of distortion that is a way of reading against the grain of meaning in a given situation, in a way that might produce new knowledge and with that, new ways of being in the world” (2022). Together with this, acts of queering also lead to making room for those left out. Taking on this endeavour, I propose to queer and distort the theatre on terror corpus by queering its hegemonic framework. In so doing, this thesis creates a space that makes room for plays that explore other embodied forms of terror, thus returning as well to Cavarero’s understanding of terror as happening in the body.

Distorting the theatre on terror corpus to include other embodied forms of terror provides a very wide pool of texts to choose from. My decision to narrow the research down to debbie tucker green’s *ear for eye* and Travis Alabanza’s *Burgerz* is based on three main reasons: (1) both plays deal, without overtly stating that, with forms of terror which distort the hegemonic epistemic framework of terror post-9/11, yet they are written and performed in the same context that produced such framework; (2) both texts are part of wider projects that expand beyond the run of the play; (3) both are plays I have been able to see live. First, as will be seen, both plays engage with embodied forms of terror that have been left out of analyses of theatre on terror in the 21st century. In so doing, they trace the origins of these forms of terror to the intellectual and social configurations of modernity and highlight the role of colonialism in producing and disseminating them. In tucker green, this is achieved by including the reading of fragments from British and French slave codes in the play’s final act; in Alabanza, by drawing on gender non-conforming identities from non-Western contexts which have been endangered, denied and marginalized by colonialism. Second,

alongside the plays, I discuss material produced by the playwrights and which expands the scope of each particular project, both in terms of their aesthetics, as well as in terms of their temporalities. This includes the filmed version of Tucker Green's *ear for eye*, which opened at the BFI and was simultaneously broadcast by BBC Two, and is now available on the BBC iPlayer, and sound and video recordings of Travis Alabanza's *Tranz Talks*, a series of conversations held in parallel to the creation of the play with various gender non-conforming people throughout the UK. In a way, this material elongates the traces already left by the performances of the plays. I refer here to the trace of performance as understood by José Esteban Muñoz, who defines the trace as that which "exists or lingers after a performance" (2009, p. 99). This persistence, Muñoz claims, draws together a "community of interlocutors" (ibid.) which both Tucker Green's film, and even more clearly Alabanza's *Tranz Talks* reinforce by becoming more present or tangible traces of the original performances. Third, and despite the fact that this is not a thesis in which the discussion of spectatorship is central, this is not an aspect of the analysis that can be entirely dispensed with. In that sense, I share Jill Dolan's enquiries on how to capture and archive the experience of the spectator when we rely only on reviewers,

and their idiosyncratic reports of what they see not only to reconstruct the content and form of a given performance, but also to gain at least a glimmer of how it might have made the audience (and the performers, by virtue of their motivating presence) *feel*. (2005, p. 9; emphasis on original)

Dolan's questioning not only touches on the difficulties derived from attempting to talk about spectatorship, but also, on the challenges researchers face when attempting to reconstruct the performance of a play they have not seen. She concludes that we write best about the performances that we have seen, a premise that I have followed in choosing what plays to write about. Living and working in Barcelona, my access to live

performances of British theatre is reduced.⁵ I saw the performance of Tucker Green's play during its run at the Royal Court Theatre in London. In the case of Alabanza's performance, despite the fact that I was not able to see the first run of the show at the Hackney Showroom, I was able to see one of the performances at the Traverse Theatre during the Edinburgh's Fringe Festival 2019 while I was a visiting researcher at the University of Glasgow. Further visual access to the play was provided thanks to the generosity of the Hackney Showroom, where I was granted access to two different recorded performances of *Burgerz*, one from its original run at the King Crescent's venue, and one from the very last performance of the play at the London's Southbank Centre. Due to the nature of the ending of the play, which as will be discussed changes in every single performance, access to multiple performances has been fundamental for the analysis provided in this thesis. Together with my own reading and watching of the plays, I have relied on the comments of other scholars, reviewers and critics.

1.3. Thesis Overview

The thesis is organized in two acts, each of which is followed by a short interval, and framed by this introduction and the conclusions to the study. The general structure thus apparently reproduces, in a way, the dramatic shape of a traditional play based on an Aristotelian structure, but is simultaneously disrupted by the two intervals, which function as queer spaces of in-betweenness. For as long as I can remember in my academic life I have been drawn to spaces of in-between-ness, interstices and thresholds, an interest that intensified with the voracious reading of queer theory. The insatiable hunger for more queer texts is a feeling I have been able to verbalize recently,

⁵ My access to the oftentimes expensive performances, even more expensive if one considers travel to and from the UK and accommodation, has been made possible by the generosity of friends who have lent me their sofas, spare rooms and inflatable mattresses, as well as the allocation of almost all my savings to self-funding the PhD, which has been written while working an almost full-time job as a bookseller while also being an adjunct lecturer (professora associada) at the University of Barcelona. In the last few years, my participation as a member of the research group "Contemporary British Theatre Barcelona" (<https://www.ub.edu/cbtbarcelona/>), led by Professor Mireia Aragay, has allowed me to fund a few theatre trips to London, where I watched one of the plays discussed in this thesis.

thanks to the work of Julietta Singh, who, writing about her discovery of queer studies recalls how “suddenly, [she] was devouring queer texts like Skittles (obviously you can’t just stop at one)” (2018, p. 53).⁶ The image of the in-between proliferates through these texts I, too, was devouring. Gloria Anzaldúa wrote about straddling two worlds and living in a place of contradictions, accompanied by “those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of ‘the normal’” (1999, p. 25). Audre Lorde’s poetry is filled with references to doorways, and “hours between dawns” (2017, p. 200). José Esteban Muñoz’s predilection for traces and ephemera as signifiers of queerness points at that which is between existence and non-existence, suggesting that when we witness queer performance ephemera remain, “[t]hey are absent and they are present, disrupting a predictable metaphysics of presence” (2009, p. 71). Both intervals are understood as queer spaces, and their presence as a will to formally reproduce the interstices that proliferate in queer studies as well as in the queer lives that are not intelligible in a heteronormative, cisgender and monosexual world that makes no room for them (us). The intervals make room for ideas, interrupt the linearity of the thesis narrative and provide a space where the more basic meaning of the word ‘essay’, from the French ‘essaier’ (to try), is put to work. In trying to draw from a queer methodology, the intervals are also messy, in that they try to (re)articulate, make sense of or understand – emphasis on the act of intending or attempting – the most challenging proposals of the thesis, sometimes going back to notions and ideas mentioned in the chapters.

Act One, divided in two parts, provides the theoretical and methodological frameworks for the thesis. The first chapter, entitled “Terror” defines what, in the context of the thesis, is understood as the hegemonic terror narrative that emerged after 9/11, and draws on the work of Sara Ahmed (2004), Rustom Bharucha (2014), Judith Butler (2004, 2009), Jasbir K. Puar (2007) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2005) to look at the effects and affects generated by it. After providing this analysis, the chapter offers a brief overview of how studies on theatre and terror(ism) have engaged

⁶ I am indebted to my colleague Dr. Cristina Alsina for recommending the work of Julietta Singh at a very timely moment.

with said framework (Boll, 2013; de Waal, 2016; Hughes, 2007, 2011; Soncini, 2016; Spencer, 2018), and suggests they have contributed – perhaps inadvertently – to the perpetuation of this frame and the subsequent concealment of other approaches to terror. This argument justifies the necessity to offer a diverse analysis of terror within theatre studies. The second chapter, entitled “Queer as Method” is influenced by the methodological turn of queer studies. Drawing on the work of Jack Halberstam (2018), Hannah McCann (2016) and José Esteban Muñoz (2009), amongst others, it drafts a “scavenger queer methodology” (Halberstam, 2018, p. 13) which mobilizes queerness to distort the aforementioned framework, slide into queer disorientation and propose a series of key methodological principles and keywords used in the analysis of the two plays. In order to do that, this second chapter provides the genealogy of second wave queer theory that has led to the emergence of queer methodologies and offers a proposal for how to apply aspects of these methodologies to the analysis and study of text-based theatre. The final part of the chapter zooms into the principles and keywords that will frame the analysis of the plays: queer messiness (Love, 2016), livability (Ahmed, 2016) and worldmaking (Muñoz, 1999).

Act One is followed by the first interval, entitled “Interval no. 1: Queering Theatre and / on Terror”. This section discusses the benefits of approaching an analysis on contemporary forms of terror through a queer methodology, as an embodied experience instead of a transnational narrative. One of the central arguments in this first interval is that by queering 21st century terror, the temporal marker provided by 9/11 is displaced, to the extent that new temporalities of terror become visible. This contributes towards the addition of ‘queer temporalities’ (Freeman, 2010) to the keywords that will constitute the analysis of the plays in Act Two.

Act Two, also divided in two chapters, provides the analysis of the plays. The first part looks at debbie tucker green’s *ear for eye*. After situating the playwright and the work, the context for the study of the play is provided. The chapter briefly looks at race relations in contemporary Britain, as well as at the connections between the play and

Pan-Africanism, and moves towards defining and identifying racial terror by looking at its colonial legacies and embodied histories.. Attending to Muñoz's emphasis on the importance of aesthetics for queer readings of the world (2009, p. 1), the chapter then moves to an analysis of the play's Afrodiasporic aesthetics. In particular, it looks at the loops, juxtapositions, repetitions and circularity that constitute the text's dramatic shape, as well as at the use of water in the film version as a way to further stress the connection between contemporary forms of racial terror and colonial histories of enslavement. The final section focuses on the ways in which the play discusses the afterlives of enslavement. In order to do that emphasis is put on the play's unfinished temporalities, as well as on how it relates to the concepts of livability and worldmaking.

The study of Alabanza's *Burgerz* follows the same structure. After situating the playwright, their work, and looking at the context of transphobia that facilitated the incident the play chronicles, the chapter provides a definition of gender terror and looks at how this is explored. The section on the play's aesthetics focuses on the intertwined relationships that can be established in the performance, as well as in *Tranz Talkz*, between the archive and the use of food as elements of the aesthetics of care. The final two sections look at the disruption of hegemonic temporalities through the use of temporal drag and the reparative capabilities of queer remembering, as well as the ways in which the play engages with the concept of worldmaking.

As part of the scavenger queer methodology used in the thesis, I have drawn on material adjacent to the plays discussed. An important contribution this thesis makes in that sense is the inclusion of Travis Alabanza's *Tranz Talkz* as part of the secondary corpus of the study. Together with the analysis of this material, made available by the access to their sound and visual archives granted by the Hackney Showroom's Co-Directors Sam Curtis Lindsay and Nina Lyndon, the thesis also includes an Annex where a transcription of the *Tranz Talkz Vox Pops* – a series of short videos recording the experience of some of the participants in *Tranz Talkz* – is included. As mentioned

elsewhere in this thesis, the transcription of the audio for these clips was donated to the venue's archives to grant wider accessibility to their material.

Act Two is followed by the second interval, entitled “Interval no: 2. Discomfort is Messy”, which interrogates how the discomfort experienced by white and cisgender audience members can be messily discussed in ways that are neither complicit with the hegemonic frameworks that silence forms of racial and gender terror, nor with forms of epistemic violence towards the racialized and gender non-conforming subjects the plays discuss. In order to do that, I go back to the question of the queer mess as a starting point to cross-examine the discomfort experienced by white and cisgender audience members when watching *ear for eye* and *Burgerz*. To do so, I draw on both, theatre reviews, as well as my own spectatorial experience of the plays as a white, cisgender woman. This allows me to speak about one very particular experience that simultaneously reveals the researcher, while not homogenising all spectators into an ideal figure that excludes other forms of spectating. One of the purposes of this final interval is also to reflect on the role and responsibilities white and cisgender scholars have when working with forms of terror and violence we are not affected by, as well as when reading and analysing texts that engage with epistemological traditions that are not white and / or cis. Instead of hiding behind premises of academic distance and neutrality, this final part intends the opposite, which is to make visible the bridges that need to be crossed in order to be fully antiracist and trans-ally scholars. This is why, throughout the thesis, I draw on the work of as many Black and gender non-conforming scholars as possible, so as to have their voices guide the reading provided of debbie tucker green and Travis Alabanza. In addition to this, Ahmed states that “to follow words is to go where they go” (2019, p. 5). To follow terror within the plays and to see how it has been explored means to follow the particular epistemic worlds where the texts reside and from which they draw. As such, I have followed tucker green into Afrodiasporic theories and Alabanza through the worlds of queer performance and, to a lesser extent, drag aesthetics.

1.4. Notes on Terminology

Given the sensitive topics this thesis explores, as well as the importance of appropriately naming and referring to non-normative identities, I find it important to briefly discuss how I have approached the use of particular terminology used to refer to racialized and gender non-conforming identities throughout the study. When referring to Travis Alabanza and their work, I have used both the terms ‘trans’ and ‘gender non-conforming’, following the author’s use of both terms. When referring to multiple queer identities, I have used the acronym LGBTQI+ except when referring to organizations or quoting from sources that use slightly different versions of it. Thus, when referring to the archives at the Bishopsgate Institute or to the UK organization Stonewall I use LGBTQ+; LGBTQIA+ to refer to the Midsumma Festival in Australia; LGBT+ to refer to the anti-abuse charity Galop: and QBIPOC (Queer, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) when quoting from Lehner or Tadman. It is important to note, however, that while these are accepted acronyms to signal the political coalition between multiple forms of gender and sexual variances, we can find multiple examples of the fragile existence of such coalition such as the erasure of lesbians, biphobia and transphobia. Both in the analysis of Alabanza’s as well as debbie tucker green’s work I have capitalized the word Black, following recent changes in style manuals which distinguish between black (colour) and Black (person). This change has both historical and political ramifications that have to do with attending to the struggles for recognition of Black communities and their fight for livable lives.⁷ Finally, I have tried to use and respect every author’s pronouns whenever possible. I apologize in advance if I have inadvertently misgendered any author.

⁷ For a brief historical overview of the capitalization of the work Black see Puyuelo, 2022, pp. 34–36.

2. Act One

2.1. Terror

“Although the events of 9/11 are actual happenings in the world, those events do not intrinsically contain their own interpretation. Only through language are such events turned into a full account of that experience. Through language, we name protagonists, ascribe motivations, and provide explanations. Through language, we construct a narrative”

(Hodges, 2011, pp. 3–4)

2.1.1. Epistemological Frame of Terror

This section analyses the epistemological frame of terror that emerged after 9/11, the effects it had and the affects it generated. After looking at what the hegemonic narrative of terror-ism is, I suggest that studies on theatre and terror-ism have engaged with these hegemonic narratives in their analysis of theatre plays that directly responded to it, contributing, perhaps inadvertently, to the perpetuation of this frame.⁸

2.1.1.1. The Narrative of Terror-ism

The hegemonic narrative of terror-ism that contributed to the emergence of an epistemological framework of terror has its origins in the terrorist attacks perpetrated by Islamic organization Al-Qaeda on the morning of Tuesday September 11, 2001.

Four commercial airplanes were hijacked, two of them crashed into the World Trade

⁸ For terminological disambiguation on the uses of terror, terrorism and war on terror, I will use the term ‘terror’ when speaking about terror as an affect, ‘terror-ism’ (following Spivak (2005) when referring to instances where terror and terrorism have been conflated, and ‘war on terror’ when referring to Bush’s narrative on terror. Different spellings (including capitalization or lack thereof, as well as the use or not of quotation marks) will only appear when quoting from authors using a different form.

Center complex in New York City, leading to the collapse of the North and South towers; the third plane impacted on the Pentagon, and the fourth crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. The reactions to the 9/11 terrorist attacks implied the emergence and establishment of a very particular narrative (Hodges, 2011, p. 1) that shaped not only the political responses to the attack, but also affected the everyday life of Western and Non-Western countries alike.

Despite the spectacularism of the attacks and its political and social ramifications, I have to agree with Jacques Rancière's claim that 9/11 did not mark any rupture in the symbolic order (2010, p. 104). I refer here to Rancière's discussion of 9/11 as a symbolic event which did not reveal any tear in our relations to the real or the symbolic as our ability to register it was not called into question. On the contrary, as he states,

the American government accepted, posing as its own axiom, the very principle of its attackers. It accepted to characterize the conflict in religious and ethnic terms as a combat between good and evil, and therefore as one that is as everlasting as the opposition between them. (2010, p. 99)

To Rancière, what 9/11 and its aftermath revealed was the substitution of politics by consensus in the US, used to validate their response to what they identified as "absolute evil" (2010, p. 103). Rancière concludes that "[i]f a symbolic rupture occurred, it had already been accomplished. To want to date it on September 11 is ultimately a way of eliminating all political reflection on the practices of Western states and of reinforcing the scenario of civilization's infinite war against terrorism, of Good against Evil" (2010, p. 104). Yet, even if the attacks did not disrupt the symbolic order, the cascade of ramifications they elicited needs to be acknowledged, and the way in which the narrative around them was constructed needs to be highlighted. The political response to 9/11 materialised in a military operation as the US initiated a series of wars to fight "an abstract enemy: terrorism" (Spivak, 2005, p. 82): the invasions of Afghanistan and

Iraq in 2003 and 2004 respectively. Together with this, the aforementioned discursive response contributed to create what we could call an epistemological frame of terrorism, that found in the attacks of 9/11 its starting point, which was indeed narrated as a moment of symbolic rupture.

I borrow the concept of epistemological frame from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990, p. 195) and "Giving an Account of Oneself" (2001, p. 23), developed further and applied to the specific context of the 'war on terror' in *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* (2009). Butler defines epistemological frames as politically saturated operations of power that "delimit the sphere of appearance" (2009, p. 1). Following Michel Foucault's notion of the "regime of truth" (as cited in Butler, 2001, p. 24), Butler argues that frames are not simply "theoretical perspectives that we bring to the analysis of politics, but [...] modes of intelligibility that further the workings of the state and, as such, are them exercises of power even as they exceed the specific domain of state power" (2009, p. 149). Framing raises both epistemological and ontological problems, as it not only delimits the sphere of appearance of certain lives, but it also poses the question "*What is a life?*" (2009, p. 1 emphasis in original). These operations of power define which lives are conceived as lives and which lives are not, regulating who is recognized and who is not. In Butler's words, they "work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot (or that produce lives across a continuum of life) [...] not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject" (2009, p. 3). As a consequence, those lives not apprehended or recognized as lives within frameworks that establish specific norms of recognition are at risk of experiencing increased violence and precariousness, as frames also regulate and sustain the conditions for those lives (2009, p. 24). They regulate whose lives become intelligible and whose not.⁹

⁹ Both apprehension and recognition will appear in this thesis following Butler's use of the terms. Apprehension is defined by her as "a form of knowing [that] is bound up with sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are not always – or not yet – conceptual forms of knowledge" (2009, p. 5). Recognition is defined by Butler as "an act or practice undertaken by at least two subjects, and

Within the epistemological frame of terror-ism, terror and terrorism became an abstract enemy that was rarely explicitly defined, but was quickly reproduced until it permeated public discourse (Spivak, 2005, p. 82). If we conclude with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that “[a] response not only supposes and produces a constructed subject of response, it also constructs its object” (ibid.), in the case of the ‘war on terror’ the subject of response became the West and its allies, and the object it constructed were both terror-ism and terrorists. The widely circulated post-9/11 definitions of terror, terrorism and terrorists therefore were articulated by those who identified as the victims of the violence perpetrated by the object of the response – that is, the West – and not by the subjects of the attack. In that sense, Spivak’s suggestion that “for the sake of constructing a response [...] a binary is useful” (ibid.) is manifested in the operations of “us-and-theming”(Spivak, 2005, p. 87) that the discursive response facilitated and that resurrected the clash of civilizations thesis (Mishra, 2018, pp. 18–19).¹⁰

In a televised intervention on September 15, 2001, George W. Bush defined the attacks as a “despicable act of terror” and “the signs of a first battle of war”, a war that the US was going to win. In the same intervention, Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that 9/11 was an assault not only against the United States but also against civilisation, and against the countries which lost citizens in the attacks, a “hideous attack against America and free people everywhere” (as cited in Bush 2001a). Their intervention announced the launching of a campaign against “the whole curse of terror” (2001a). Following from this, in an address to Congress delivered on September 20, 2001, Bush stated that the US was now “a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution” (Bush, 2001b).

which [...] constitutes a reciprocal action” (2009, p. 6) in order for recognition to take place “a life has to be intelligible as a life, has to conform to certain conceptions of what life is in order to become recognizable” (2009, p. 7). From Butler’s definitions, we can understand that apprehension is a mode of knowing that precedes and is not yet recognition.

¹⁰ For further discussions on the clash of civilizations thesis see Huntington 1993; Jervis and Huntington 1997; Asad 2007; Said 2014.

During his intervention, the terrorists were identified as “practicing a fringe form of Islamic extremism” that “perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam” with the goal of “remaking the world and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere” (ibid.). The image of the terrorist was depicted as elusive yet potentially omnipresent (“There are thousands of these terrorists in more than 60 countries”), and trained in the “tactics of terror” in camps in Afghanistan after which they were “sent back to their homes or sent to hide in countries around the world to plot evil and destruction” with the aim to “disrupt and end a way of life” (ibid.), a Western way of life. The proliferation of this discourse established an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy whereby ‘us’ became Euro-American countries and their allies, and ‘them’ these elusive and omnipresent terrorists, hidden around the world, and the countries that gave them support, a dichotomy that, as Butler reminds us, “position[s] ‘the West’ as articulating the paradigmatic principles of the human” (2009, p. 125). Reminiscent of the aforementioned clash of civilizations thesis, Bush’s message to the world was clear, “[e]very nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.” (Bush, 2001b). George W. Bush’s “war on terror” became “the world’s fight”, “civilization’s fight”, “the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom” (ibid.).

As Rustom Bharucha has argued, “terror [...] has an unsettling capacity to proliferate through words” (2014, p. xiv). His claim follows on Hodges’s study on the ‘war on terror’ narrative, based on textual analysis of the discourses of George W. Bush in the aftermath of 9/11, as well as speeches delivered to justify the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. Through a careful discursive analysis, Hodges has established how “the repeated narrations by the president of the United States effectively accumulate into a larger cultural narrative shared by many within the nation (and beyond)” (2011, p. 3). Although originated in the United States, the ramifications of the ‘war on terror’ narrative have permeated the way the West has positioned itself in front of what has been repeatedly named the “terror threat” (AFP, 2014; EFE, 2015; Hewitt, 2008), and resurfaces every time a new terrorist attack with links to Al-Qaeda or DAESH is

perpetrated in the West (Aguirre, 2015; L'Obs avec AFP, 2015; Rosenthal & Schulman, 2018). In Hodges's words:

The Bush "War on Terror" Narrative has provided "the official story, the dominant frame" [...] for understanding 9/11 and America's response to terrorism. It has allowed for the discursive justification not just of a metaphorical "war on terror" but of the very real wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. (2011, p. 3)

The immediate effects of Bush's discourse and declaration of a war on terror in US politics were the creation of the Office of Homeland Security, a cabinet responding directly to him, which became the Department of Homeland Security in 2003, dedicated to confronting the threats faced by the US, and responsible, amongst others, of anti-terrorism, border control, immigration, and cybersecurity. This was followed by the launching of an armed campaign in Afghanistan and the second Gulf war in Iraq.

The United Kingdom was a character in the narrative of terror since the beginning. The presence of former Prime Minister Tony Blair during George W. Bush's address to congress was acknowledged with the words "America has no truer friend than Great Britain. (APPLAUSE) Once again, we are joined together in a great cause. I'm so honored the British prime minister has crossed an ocean to show his unity with America. Thank you for coming, friend." (Bush, 2001b). The response in Britain, in the form of the introduction of heightened race-based security protocols, combined racist policing and racial profiling, as well as legal developments that erased both the assumption of innocence as well as the right to a fair trial (Bhattacharyya, 2008, pp. 75–76; de Waal, 2020, p. 3). The British National Party responded by targeting Islamisation within the UK as the real threat to "the moral future of the nation itself" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 77). This narrative, together with the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act of 2001, which included an amendment by which asylum seekers suspicious of being international terrorists would be denied asylum, contributed to the juxtaposition of the

figures of the international terrorist and the bogus asylum seeker, and as a direct consequence, to the criminalisation of the latter (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 79–80).

Perhaps one of the most pervasive ways the narrative of terror-ism has permeated the UK has been through security announcements in public transport. Since 2016, announcements reminding passengers not to leave their luggage unattended – as unattended luggage will be removed and may be destroyed – are accompanied by a display of posters encouraging people that if they ‘see it’, they should ‘say it’, so British transport police will ‘sort it’. The campaign, according to the official report, “aims to help build a more vigilant network on railways across the country and raise awareness of the vital role the public can play in keeping themselves and others safe” (“See It Say It Sorted - New National Campaign,” 2016). The aim to build a more vigilant network drafts the script to transform all passengers into potential vigilantes or potential surveillants of inappropriate behaviour as well as potential suspects or assailants, the consequences of which, however, are neither a safer environment nor an urban landscape devoid of terror, but the proliferation of a narrative that criminalises certain bodies over others, as such announcements become part of the terror-ism narrative. Continuous exposure to the pre-recorded announcements and the posters of the campaign ultimately creates, as John Hutnyk reminds us, announcement fatigue, disaster fatigue and empathy numbness (2014, p. 38), which reinforce the epistemological frame of terror-ism and reduce the capacity for a critical response that questions the social and political ramifications of such an epistemological frame. With this in mind, I suggest we think, with Hutnyk, about the “sinister kind of theatre” (understood here in metaphorical terms and not as a reference to drama) that emerged in Britain in the twenty-first century, and which revealed “disturbing emerging anxieties” which took the form of a “more stark racial contract in the UK.” (2014, pp. 25, 27), diminished a heritage of anti-racist and anti-imperialist criticism and contributed to the “institution of a racist state” (Bhattacharyya, 2008, p. 85).

The definitions of terror that circulated after 9/11 conflate terror and terrorism, contributing to a widespread circulation of the word terror in its exclusive identification with terrorism, and to be more precise, to Islamic terrorism. In light with Hodges, scholars agree on the fact that one of the clearest responses to 9/11 was a heightened nationalist discourse that shaped public discussions on the West's response to the attacks (Bharucha, 2014; Butler, 2004; de Waal, 2016; Hodges, 2011; Resano, 2017). This generation of an "intense resurgence of nationalism" has exacerbated terrorism in Israel, Malaysia, India and elsewhere (Spivak, 2005, p. 84) and as Keith M. Murphy states, "[a]lthough by now the phrase war on terror may have all but disappeared from mainstream public discourse, the ideological proclivities it helped articulate continue to thrive as a new reality in global politics" (2013, 524). Hodges's analysis shows us how the quick response of George W. Bush, in which 9/11 was presented as an act of war against the United States contributed to the establishment of a "generic framework of a nation at war [that] provide[d] a highly recognizable template for narrating the 'war on terror'" (2011, p. 19). Declaring a war on something as abstract and intangible as terror had the capacity to enable the US and its allies – amongst which was the UK – to set themselves above international law for an indefinite period of time (Bharucha, 2014, p. 4) during which international conventions were not respected, civilian populations in Afghanistan and Iraq were killed and Islamophobic discourses in the West grew exponentially. In the next section, closer attention is paid to the affects and effects that the epistemological framework of terror has had in the West in general, and in Britain in particular.¹¹

2.1.1.2. Affects and Effects of the Narrative of Terror

This section looks at how, through the aforementioned defined epistemological frame, as well as the regulation of affect (Butler, 2009, p. 41) and the instrumentalization of left-leaning discourses such as feminism (Bhattacharyya, 2008) and queer politics (Puar,

¹¹ See Fusco, 2008 and Todorov, 2009 for artistic performances and discussions respectively on the ramifications of the breach of international law in the context of the 'war on terror'.

2007), the hegemonic narrative of terror has shaped how we think about multiculturalism and sexual freedom (Butler, 2009, p. 26), it has led to the suspension of civil liberties and political dissent (Butler, 2004, p. xvii; Spivak, 2005, p. 99) and to the restriction of “bodily mobility in social space” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 64) as the outcome of powerful racialized perceptions and racial profiling (Sewgobind, 2016; Spivak, 2005, p. 99). This has created images of the Other, “whose very existence comes to be felt as a threat to the life of the white body” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 64).

Considering the formation of the public discourse of terror, Adam Hodges states that the terror narrative is “a discursive formation that sustains a regime of truth [which] places boundaries around what can meaningfully be said and understood about the subject” (2011, p. 5). Not only that, but it has also regulated more generally the limits of discourse leading to “the curtailment of civil liberties, including intellectual freedom” (Spivak, 2005, p.99). In this sense, Sara Ahmed reminds us that in this context “[t]o be critical of the ‘war on terror’ is to be identified as ‘a terrorist’” (2004, p.169), not only because it defies the established dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’, but also, because it questions “the very ontological status of the distinction between legitimate (war) and illegitimate violence (terrorism)” which is crucial to justify “the ‘right’ to war, as well as the ‘right’ of war” (ibid.). What is particularly telling about this is that Ahmed shows us the suspension of public dissent by drawing on a feminist critique of the ‘war on terror’, in particular, the case of Canadian-based scholar Sunera Thobani, whose criticism of Canadian support to the ‘war on terror’ led to attacks, hate mail, harassing phone calls and death threats (Ahmed, 2004, p. 168). Thobani’s public dissent led to the designation of “feminism as hostile” and the “dismissal of feminists as emotional” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 170), a discursive operation that clashes with the instrumentalization of feminism in the context of the epistemological framework of terror.¹²

¹² Another publication stressing the instrumentalization of feminism for the advance of the ‘war on terror’ is Rafia Zakaria’s *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption* (2021)

In relation to this, in her 2008 text *Dangerous Brown Men*, Gargi Bhattacharyya refers to how a particular form of transnational feminism was mobilized for the purpose of advancing the discourse and agenda of the ‘war on terror’ narrative, what Butler has also referred to as “the framing of sexual and feminist politics in the service of the war effort” (Butler, 2009, p. 26). This form of gender exceptionalism, as Jasbir K. Puar notes, “works as a missionary discourse to rescue Muslim women from their oppressive male counterparts” and positions western women as “the feminist subject par excellence” (2007, p. 5). However, as Bhattacharyya states, the heralding of women’s rights to justify the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq has not resulted in a wider commitment to women’s rights, neither nationally, nor internationally (2008, p. 42). The deployment of feminist discourses has been accompanied by the proliferation of an image of women, once more, as passive victims or survivors, but, for example, never as combatants, an argument that Bhattacharyya, Adriana Cavarero and Coco Fusco, amongst others, reject.¹³ In this sense, Spivak’s remarks stating that “a feminist critical theory must repeat that expanding the war endlessly will not necessarily produce multiple-issue gender justice in the subaltern sphere” (2005, p. 84) points not only at the vacuous instrumentalization of feminism, but also highlights the necessity to mobilize a feminism that has at its core gender justice for the subaltern, as the feminism deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq, together with UN troops is entirely a discursive strategy that uses the emancipation of women as an excuse for enacting warfare.

Similarly, as Jasbir K. Puar shows in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007), both queer theory and, crucially, queer activism, have also been co-opted to further the epistemological frame of terror. In her study, Puar explores the entanglements and assemblages of queerness and terrorism and sustains that “at a performative level, queerness has always been installed in the naming of the terrorist” (2007, p. xxiv). By drawing on José Esteban Muñoz’s writings on Vaginal Davis’s

¹³ See for example Adriana Cavarero’s focus on female suicide bombers and her analysis through the figures of Medea and Medusa in her book *Horrorism* (2011) or Coco Fusco’s illumination on the role of women to torture prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo in *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators* (2008)

terrorist drag (Muñoz, 1999),¹⁴ Puar sustains the existence of historical confluences between queers and terror, as both imply perversion and deviance.¹⁵ Based on these entanglements, and using as a starting point the West's condemnation of the homophobia of Islamic states such as Iran, while simultaneously not condemning their own homophobic practices, Puar examines how the "racism of the global gay left and the wholesale acceptance of the Islamophobic rhetoric [fuelled] the war on terror" (p. xi).¹⁶ Together with this, Puar sustains that the instrumentalization of queerness resulted in an exercise of national recognition and inclusion based on the appropriation of the lingua franca of gay liberation that was "contingent upon the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary" (Puar, 2007, p. 2) which led to the surge of national homosexuality or what Puar has labelled "homonationalism" (ibid.). Queerness became, in this discursive twist, a "regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce sexual subjects" (ibid.). through the mobilization of

¹⁴ José Esteban Muñoz coined the term terrorist drag in his exploration on the ways Afro-Chicana drag queen Vaginal Davis terroristically appropriated white punk elements in her drag performances, which, using elements of a white subculture, interrogated and complicated normative understandings of race and ethnicity. According to Muñoz, Davis's performance practice "stirs up desires and enables subjects to imagine a way of breaking away from the restraint of the social body" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 100). Her drag, Muñoz suggests, "uses humor and parody [...] as disidentificatory strategies whose effect on the dominant public sphere is that of a counterpublic terrorism" (ibid.). Ultimately, Muñoz defines this kind of drag as terrorist because the performer is "performing the nation's internal terrors around race, gender and sexuality" (1999, p. 108).

¹⁵ It is important to note here that Rustom Bharucha has questioned the extent to which queer politics can be assembled to the figure of the terrorist in non-Western contexts, in particular in the Indian Subcontinent and the Arab world. According to Bharucha, Puar's analogy cannot necessarily be sustained "outside the grassroots realities of community and sexual politics in the United States" (2014, p. 81) where the 'monstrosity' attached to the Muslim – and in particular to the figure of Osama Bin Laden who was "racialized and sexualized with negative connotations of homosexuality" (2014, p. 82) – was not the same than in the West. As he states "Even as [Bin Laden] may have been condemned as 'evil' or, indeed, disparaged as 'bad Muslim', or, worse still, a 'bad terrorist', he was not demonized in Indian public culture on the grounds of his sexual perversity, femininity, or paedophilic affiliations" (ibid.). Despite Bharucha's criticism, however, Puar's suggestion is still relevant for an understanding of how the epistemological framework of terror worked in the West.

¹⁶ As an example, Puar highlights the blatant condemnation of the execution of two young Iranian gay boys that led to the declaration of July 19 as the International Day of Action against Homophobic Persecution in Iran by LGBTIQ+ organizations OutRage! (UK) and IDAHO (France), together with petitions by Human Rights Campaign demanding Condoleza Risse – US Secretary of State at the time – to condemn the killings (2007, p. x); this global condemnation however was not elicited when the torture practices at Abu Ghraib showed the "revolting homophobia of the US military" (2007, p.xi).

Orientalist constructions on Muslim sexuality (2007, p. 4). As Puar puts it, there was “a very specific production of terrorist bodies against properly queer subjects” (2007, p. xiii); this led to the creation of a binary opposition between legitimate and illegitimate queerness, by which legitimate queerness served to reinforce the epistemological framework of terror. Zooming into the experiences of South Asian queer diasporic subjects in the US and Britain, in particular turbaned men of the Sikh community, Puar sustains that their bodies are “affectively troubling” (2007, p. xxvii). In the aftermath of 9/11, Sikhs being mistakenly read as Muslims were experiencing a growth of hate crimes directed against them as they were racially profiled as “terrorist look-alike” (2007, p. 175). Paradoxically, the same queerness that defined them – understanding queerness as the aforementioned perversion and deviance – was being instrumentalized to create an ideal queer citizen against the figure of the terrorist. This, established a transition in how queerness and queer-subjects were recognized, “from being figures of death (i.e. the AIDS epidemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e. gay marriage and families)” (2007, p. xii). The ‘new’, normative queer subject became the antagonist of the terrorist, an operation that was affectively charged.

In the context of a post-9/11 world, Sasha Torres suggests that the political uses of the generation and management of affect were well understood, concluding that “one could tell the story of the Bush administration as a series of more or less successful efforts to provoke and press into service the unwieldy affective intensities mobilized by 9/11” (2010, p. 45). In the particular context of the setting of the Guantánamo Bay interrogation camp in Cuba – as well as other CIA black sites and military prisons – and its subsequent televisual representations, Torres sees a desire to terrorize beyond the physical confines of the camp. With that, she concludes that “Guantánamo has served the administration as a technology to produce certain kinds of affect not only in those imprisoned there, but also in their communities, and in some members of what we might call “the general public” (2010, p. 47). Similarly, the analysis of this and other emotional and affective dynamics of post-9/11 developments have

been central in the work undertaken by Sara Ahmed (2004), Judith Butler (2009), and Ann Cvetkovich (2013) who have explored how affects become “sites of publicity and community formation” (Cvetkovich, 2013, p. 171) as a consequence of the epistemological frame of terror-ism.

Drawing on Talal Asad’s work on suicide bombing (2007), Butler establishes a close link between frames of recognition and affective dispositions. Succinctly put, Butler asserts that “our moral responses, responses that first take form as an affect, are tacitly regulated by certain kinds of interpretative frameworks” (2008, p. 45) And while Butler rightly problematizes the ‘we’ in this proposition, they conclude that the way we experience and interpret the world around us is regulated by what we feel. The fact that “affect is regulated by interpretative schemes” (2008, p. 47), that is, by an epistemological frame of recognition, contributes towards establishing a difference between lives that are apprehended and recognized as lives, and those that are not, consequently establishing as well which lives can be grieved. For Butler, “[t]he differential distribution of grievability across populations has implications for why and when we feel politically consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous sadism, loss, and indifference” (2009, p. 24). As will be discussed throughout the thesis, the same epistemological frame of recognition that regulates grievability, contributes towards obscuring non-hegemonic embodied experiences of terror.

The repercussions of the epistemological frame of terror on public emotional dynamics have also been explored by Ann Cvetkovich’s work on public feelings and the depatologization of negative affects. The work Cvetkovich has produced together with a network of feminist and queer activists, artists and scholars reimagining political life and collectivity, sheds light on the discursive and political operations that have caused what she identifies as “political depression” and “fatigue with traditional forms of protest” (2013, p. 170) and shows how “global politics and history manifest themselves at the level of lived affective experience” (2013, p. 171). In the particular context of the terror-ism narrative, this has taken the form of collective expressions of fear, anxiety

and melancholia, regulated by state-produced discourses which limited where these affects could be generated and how to experience or express them, an argument mirrored especially in Sara Ahmed's take on the role of disgust in the construction of 9/11 as a fetish object (2004, p. 96), and her discussion on public expressions of grief and queerness (2004, p. 157).

In her analysis on the role of emotions in the construction of public discourse, Ahmed sustains that what we feel is "mediated by ideas that are already implicated in the very impressions we make of others and the way those impressions surface as bodies" (2004, p. 83). In the particular case of disgust, the emotion make bodies "recoil" from each other's proximity (*ibid.*), pulling away "with an intense movement that registers in the pit of the stomach" (2004, p. 85); this notwithstanding, Ahmed sustains that disgust involves not only corporeal intensities but also speech acts (2004, p. 84), which contribute to generate particular effects, such as the responses to the 9/11 attacks, ultimately manifested in the construction of the epistemological frame of terror-ism. An added effect of the speech acts that contribute to disgust is the generation of a community of witnesses (2004, p. 94), since "disgust works to align the individual with the collective" (2004, p.95). This collective or "audience" (2004, p. 96) is presumed to share this feeling of disgust, and in so doing, contribute towards constructing the bodies of others as hateful, sickening and/or disgusting. Ahmed explains how this operates discursively as such:

So the word 'disgust' is articulated by the subject, as a way of describing the event, which works to create the event as a border object, as a marker of what we are not and could not be. The word 'disgust' is then transferred from the event to the bodies of those others who are held responsible for the event. (2004, p. 97)

As she succinctly puts it, "[t]he speech act, 'It's disgusting!' becomes 'The are disgusting,' which translates into, 'We are disgusted by them'" (2004, p. 98).

A connection between the discursive effects of disgust and the relationship between fear, space and bodies can be established by looking further into Ahmed's arguments. Ahmed states that "fear is felt differently by different bodies in the sense that there is a relationship to space and mobility at stake in the differential organizations of fear itself" (2004, p. 68). This relationship between fear and space is undoubtedly present in the epistemological frame of terror. Ahmed's exploration of the workings of fear in relation to space, or what she calls "the spatial politics of fear" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 69) are illustrated in her work via the example of a racist encounter between a white child and a Black man, extracted from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*. In Fanon's example, a white child, afraid upon the sight of a Black man, retracts into his mother's arms, seeking refuge. This example, according to Ahmed, shows us how fear leads some bodies – in this case the white child's – to embrace the world they inhabit, whereas, as she puts it, "the black subject, the one who fears the white child's fear [...] is crushed by that fear, by being sealed into a body that tightens up, and takes up less space" (2004, p. 69). Put differently, fear – and its conceptual relative, terror – "restricts some bodies through the movement or expansion of others" (ibid.) and limits the mobility of certain bodies in social space.

John Hutnyk's argument in *Pantomime Terror: Music and Politics* (2014) can offer some insight on how looking at the narrative of terror as a performance, or as he puts it, a pantomime, can help us better understand the effects of the circulation of this narrative and its relationship to body mobility in space. With Ariane de Waal, I suggest that Hutnyk's proposal to use pantomime as a metaphor to describe the response of the state in the performance of the 'war on terror', and "our own audience participation within this system" (de Waal, 2017, p. 7) is both provocative and productive. The metaphoric use of pantomime in his work on the response of popular culture to the epistemological frame of terror contributes to define the 'war on terror' as a "white supremacist political drama" and identifies the existence of a "symbolic or regulatory terror alongside the real horror of war" (Hutnyk, 2014, p. 1), which is part of the

production of death and is manifested in racial profiling, a proliferation of the culture of fear, and a resurgence of nationalist chauvinism (2014, p. 2), the effects of which exceed the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Racial profiling had a direct effect in the form of restrictions of “bodily mobility in social space” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 64) which have sometimes bordered the ridiculous. As de Waal assesses, via Puar and Hutnyk, in her analysis of the assemblage of the traveling terrorist, “the notion of pantomime terror usefully captures the absurdity of the processes of demonization that force ‘Asian-looking’ men to carry innocuous props onto the Tube in order to disidentify as terrorists – quite literally, in some cases” (2017, pp. 7–8). Her statement responds to reports that assessed how Asian-looking men used strategies such as deferring from carrying rucksacks or visibly aligning with Western lifestyle while riding the tube in the UK to prevent inducing fear to fellow commuters by being associated with the image of the ‘could-be-terrorist’ (Ahmed, 2004, p. 79). De Waal’s analysis concludes that

Commuters are not the passive recipients of a spectacle they are free to applaud (or not), but they are actively involved in the grotesque construction of the travelling terrorist. It is through their affective responses to this figure in public space – on public transport, in particular – that the racialised male (and sometimes also female) body is produced as a fearsome object, as the villain in today’s real-life panto. (2017, pp. 8–9)

Within the epistemological frame of terror this villain is interpreted by any Muslim passing or Asian-looking traveller who fits in the image of the travelling terrorist produced by the “visual economies of ‘the war on terror’” (de Waal, 2017, p. 1); to this villain, certain spaces are off-limits, as “[t]he ‘regime of racialised visibility’ regulates access and mobility in the metropolis. For the sake of protecting the ‘native’ subject, certain places become unavailable to the racialised subject, or at least difficult to traverse, or spaces that she can only pass with the help of certain props” (de Waal, 2017, p. 12). These powerful racialized perceptions (Sewgobind, 2016; Spivak, 2005, p.

99) create images of the Other, “whose very existence comes to be felt as a threat to the life of the white body” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 64). Ahmed reminds us that this extreme racial profiling, and the legal ramifications of it – exemplified in the possibility to detain those bodies within the nation that are identified with potential terrorists – is sustained by the structural possibility that “the terrorist could be anyone and anywhere” (2004, p. 79). However, this possible anyone is limited by racial profiling, as Leti Volpp states, “the responses to September 11 facilitated a new identity category that groups together persons who appear Middle Eastern, Arab or Muslim” (Volpp as cited in Ahmed, 2004, p. 75), leading to a growing islamophobia in the West.

As seen in the previous paragraphs, a common theme emerges from Ahmed (2004) and Butler (2004, 2009), and that is how the affective dynamics of the epistemological frame of terror have also regulated public manifestations of grief. Most importantly, who has been allowed to grieve and be grieved. As mentioned before, Butler sustains that there is an unequal distribution of grievability; this results, according to Ahmed, in the exclusion of queer lives and queer losses from the public cultures of grief, to the extent that “the public scripts of grief after September 11 were full of signs of heteronormativity” (2004, p. 157). At this point, and taking this argument further, I want to suggest that this unequal distribution of grievability also has consequences for which bodies are recognized as experiencing terror and which bodies are not. One of the most immediate tensions of this is the understanding of the self as being bound to others but also the creation of the Other by aligning some bodies inside a community while excluding those whose lives are not recognized. This crucially resonates with Butler’s assertion that “humanity is [...] implicitly divided between those about whom we feel urgent and unreasoned concern and those whose lives and deaths simply do not touch us or do not appear as lives at all” (2008, p. 60). This paradigm operates on “the condition of certain embedded structures of valuation” (ibid.) which establish what lives can be apprehended, such as the discussed epistemological frame of terror-ism. As

will be unpacked in the first interval, queering and distorting this epistemic frame allows for the appearance of experiences of terror excluded from this narrative.

2.1.2. Theatre and Terror

Both 9/11 and the subsequent military operations and anti-terrorism policies have been read from the lens of their theatricality and spectacularism, starting with the declarations made by German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen who defined 9/11 as “the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos” and stated that “[y]ou have people who are so concentrated on one performance, and then 5,000 people are dispatched into eternity, in a single moment. In comparison with that, we’re nothing as composers.” (as cited in Taylor et al., 2002, p. 114). Stockhausen’s shocking analogy between 9/11 and a live performance is referenced by Ann Pellegrini who, reading 9/11 as a series of staged events, manifests that “an individual performance’s power to break into, interrupt, the fabric of the everyday derives in part from its affective reach, its capacity to move us, for better and for worse, in ways we could not anticipate” (as cited in Taylor et al., 2002, p. 114) including joy, delight, insight, but also, horror, rage and terror. Similarly, Stephen Colbert compared the detainee centre at Guantanamo Bay to a “giant art installation”, declaring George W. Bush and Barack Obama as “the greatest performance artists of our generation” (in Brady 2012, p. xii). In this regard, Gargi Bhattacharyya has affirmed that “the war on terror [...] includes a cultural project that seeks to create a consenting global audience” (2008, p. 2). Both the reading of the events of 9/11 as a performance and the requirement of an audience for the cultural project of the epistemological framework of terror has established closed theoretical links between the war on terror and performance studies, as well as has paved the way for a thorough exploration of the ‘war on terror’ on stage.

In the field of contemporary British theatre there have been numerous theatrical responses to both the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent military interventions of the so-called ‘war on terror’, such as David Hare’s *Stuff Happens* (2004), Dennis Kelly’s *Osama*

the Hero (2005), Mark Ravenhill's *Product* (2005) and *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2007), Caryl Churchill's *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You* (2006), Simon Stephens's *Motortown* (2006) and *Pornography* (2008) or Roy Williams's *Days of Significance* (2007), to name but a few. The staging of these and many other plays has, in turn, contributed to the publication of a significant number of monographs engaging in the analysis of how terror has been performed on British and other international stages (mostly in the U.S but with references also to plays staged in European theatres). The existing body of literature that has analysed these productions has engaged to a great extent with the epistemological framework of terror. Looking at this body of work, three different trends of research emerge so far: studies that insert the analysis of terror in the wider context of new war studies (Boll, 2013; Colleran, 2012; Finburgh, 2017; Soncini, 2016), those that look at the interjections between terror, politics and performance studies (Alvarez, 2018; Bell, 2003; Bharucha, 2014; Brady, 2012; Brady & Mantoan, 2017; Colleran, 2012; Mantoan, 2018; Stevens, 2016), and finally, those looking at the possibilities that theatre has to carry out a critical intervention into the hegemonic narrative of terror (de Waal, 2016; Hughes, 2011). A brief overview of significant research in this field will serve to highlight the gaps on existing scholarship. In particular, I wish to show how existing research risks replicating the language and images upon which the epistemological framework of terror was built.

2.1.2.1. Theatre, Conflict and New War Studies

A substantial number of publications have engaged with the theoretical framework of new war studies, where discussions on terror are sometimes conflated with discussions on modern warfare. Jeanne Colleran's *Theatre and War: Theatrical Responses since 1991* (2012) discusses post-9/11 drama in a wider volume on theatre and war whose chronology spans the period between 1991, where real-time war spectatorship was inaugurated with the live broadcast of the bombing of Baghdad during the first Persian Gulf War and the war in Afghanistan (2012, p. 3). Colleran's discussion is built around

the metaphor of terrorists not only as plane hijackers but also as hijackers of the human imagination (2012, p. 3), as well as around the role of the media to alter political analysis and in turn, critical art (2012, p. 6). Her analysis is based on the premise that spectators to the plays discussed would have “entered the theatre with visual and information overload” (2012, p. 7) , as well as on the premise that theatre enacts a critical and ethical intervention in the discourse of the ‘war on terror’, one that media does not allow. A significant gap in the studies that will be discussed lies on the definition of terror and its conflation with terrorism as defined by the post-9/11 epistemological framework of terror. Colleran’s text acknowledges the framework as a requirement for the articulation of public discourse surrounding 9/11 (2012, p. 93) and explores how a series of plays, such as Anne Nelson’s *The Guys* (2001), John McGrath’s *Hyperlynx* (2001) or Neil LaBute’s *The Mery Seat* (2002) share this narrative framework, usually by beginning with or including an explanation of what the main character was doing when the attacks took place (2012, p. 93). However, attention to the chapter entitled “Facing Terror” (2012, p. 103) shows how a clear distinction between terror and post-9/11 terrorism is not made, ultimately contributing, perhaps inadvertently, to the perpetuation of the epistemological framework that confines the experience of terror to this hegemonic narrative.

Julia Boll’s *The New War Plays. From Kane to Harris* (2013) interrogates the figure of Giorgio Agamben’s ‘homo sacer’ by looking at plays that engage with the changing nature of war, paying attention to how new wars are structured, and to where the Western community stands in relation to them. In particular, Boll’s study is interested in what new forms of representing these new wars have appeared in contemporary theatre, with an interest on “how the disturbing experience of war may be represented on stage and mediated to an audience that, for the most part, does not have its own war experience” (2013, p. 3). Within Boll’s work, terror is explored within the context of the hegemonic epistemological frame by incorporating the ‘war on terror’ into the general framework of new war theories, characterized by “perpetual warfare, fear and

the state of exception” (2013, p. 29). Similarly, Sara Soncini’s *Forms of Conflict: Contemporary Wars on the British Stage* (2016) emphasizes “the new wars of the global age” (2016, p. xiii), focusing on the shift from the twentieth to the twenty-first century as a moment in which traditional warfare was substituted by what Mary Kaldor identified as “new wars” (as cited in Soncini 2016, p. 3), and interrogating if and how these new wars contributed to new ways of representation of conflict on stage. As identified also by Julia Boll (2019), however, the choice of plays in Soncini results in a conflation of contemporary war and terror/terrorism, obscuring the differences between them as well as other possible understandings of terror. A somewhat analogous approach is taken by Clare Finburgh in her volume *Watching War on the Twenty-First Century Stage: Spectacles of Conflict* (2017). In her text, Finburgh thoroughly interrogates the role of theatre in staging and challenging the spectacle in contemporary warfare. She outlines different attempts to define ‘terrorism’ and ‘war’ to conclude that the difference has to do with perspective (2017, p. 132) and defines acts of terrorism as “anti-state, illegitimate and criminal” and war as “state-sanctioned, legitimate and legal” (2017, p. 133). However, and in a similar fashion to Soncini, Finburgh conflates terror and terrorism, which maybe once again risks reproducing the language and narrative of the epistemological framework of terror.

2.1.2.2. Terror, War and Performance Studies

Another cluster of existing research has looked at the interjections between terror, war and performance studies, as is the case with Sara Brady’s *Performance, Politics and the War on Terror: Whatever it Takes* (2012). Her text is one of several that, through performance studies, looks at the post-9/11 era as one where politics and theatre collapsed, and supports the idea, present in many of the publications on the topic, that the war on terror has a capacity to alter how we understand the relationship between politics and performance (see for example Bell, 2003; Brady, 2012; Colleran, 2012; Mantoan, 2018; Stevens, 2016) and render visible the “performativity of politics” (Brady, 2012, p. 2). A

similar argument is raised by Lindsey Mantoan's *War as Performance: Conflicts in Iraq and Political Theatricality* where she also analyses the relation between the war on terror and performance (2018, p. 2). Within this cluster, Rustom Bharucha's monograph *Terror and Performance* (2014) offers the only available non-Euro-American analysis on the imbricate relationships between terror and performance, which takes as a starting point the questioning of the equation of terror with terrorism.

While not focusing on contemporary British drama, Bharucha's approach to terror is particularly influential for my research in regards to shifting the frame that contains the terror narrative; particularly compelling is his suggestion that "the only way of breathing life into the vocabulary of terror is to insist that it should not be conflated with what has come to be hegemonized as 'terrorism'" (2014, p. 2). In this regard he states:

If one wishes to counter this discourse and emphasize the obvious fact that Americans are not the exclusive victims of terror, then one needs to acknowledge that terror is experienced in multitudinous, palpable, and infinitesimal ways across the world, where ordinary people live with terror on a daily basis. (2014, p. 3)

His proposal, not only culturally and geographically, decentres definitions of terror from a Euro-American context. It also allows for a wider reflection of what it means to live with terror. Yet, while stressing the necessity to "free terror from the hegemonic discourse of terrorism" to call attention to other manifestations of terror (2014, pp. 2–3), he acknowledges the methodological nightmare that this entails given the dominance of the discourse of terrorism today. His strategy to overcome this methodologically fraught endeavour is to focus on the tensions between terror, terrorism and the different contexts in which these coexist, and avoid the erasure of histories and contexts obliterated by the "imperatives of the 'September 11' narrative" (2014, p. 3).

This is somehow echoed by Lara Stevens, whose recurrent writing of the word ‘terror’ between inverted commas in her volume *Anti-War Theatre After Brecht: Dialectical Aesthetics in the Twenty-First Century* (2016) suggests the term is problematic and contingent. She refers to Bharucha’s work to claim that terror is the name of an affect, and the ‘war on terror’ is a war on words, whose performative energy has established a narrative “of who is ‘good’ and who is ‘evil’, which side is ‘right’ and which is ‘wrong’” (2016, p. 10). Ultimately, she establishes theatre’s capacity to intervene in the narrative. In particular, Stevens argues that “theatre, with its strong historical relationship to narrative and the performative energy of words, is particularly well suited to critiquing, intervening, parodying or changing the dominant language and depiction of invasion, conflict, terrorism and terror” (2016, p. 10). The dominance of the epistemological framework of terror, however, problematizes the endeavour of freeing terror from terrorism. Stevens’s text is built around the tension of making the frame visible while focusing only on plays which engage with conflicts around the ‘war on terror’, while Bharucha explicitly acknowledges how the task is “fraught with methodological and theoretical problems [...] given the sheer dominance of the discourse on terrorism today” concluding that “it is not easy to dis-imbricate the diverse epistemologies and affects of terror from the larger rhetorical and political apparatus of terrorism in which it is subsumed” (2014, p. 3). In order to overcome this, Bharucha proposes that together with being regarded as “extra-state collective action involving physical force” (2014, p. 11) – a definition of terror he borrows from the US State Department – terror should also be regarded as an affect, as Gayatri Spivak also suggests (2005).

It is in this understanding of terror as an affect where my research is particularly influenced by Bharucha. His endeavour, however, is culturally and geographically decentered from the epistemological framework of terror, as his work focuses on specific everyday life performances and experiences of terror in Manila, Pakistan, India, Rwanda and South Africa. While I cannot continue his endeavour from my position as a white, European researcher, I am inspired by his will to shift the frame of recognition

of terror and I propose to apply this to the British context – one from which I am also decentered as a Catalan researcher based in Barcelona – and focus on those lived experiences of terror that are not intelligible within the established narrative of terror.

2.1.2.3. Theatre, Terror and (Critical) Mimesis

Two general trends can be identified in the monographs published so far, and which differ substantially in their approach to the role of theatre in the construction of the discourse of terror. Finburgh's optimistic approach posits theatre as a site of resistance against the spectacularism of conflict, following the path of previous publications such as Soncini or Colleran's. Ariane de Waal, instead, interrupts this dynamic by highlighting that theatrical events cannot be separated from this discursive formation or automatically pitted against the media in her book *Theatre on Terror: Subject Positions in British Drama* (2016), a view she develops from Jenny Hughes's *Performance in a Time of Terror: Critical Mimesis and the Age of Uncertainty* (2011). De Waal builds upon Hughes's notion of 'critical mimesis' which asks how theatre can display dominant values without replicating them. Drawing on poststructuralist vocabulary and discussing the plays through Michel Foucault's understanding of subject positions, as well as approaching the 'war on terror' as a "discursive formation in the Foucauldian sense" (2016, p. 2), she contends that theatre events that engage with the 'war on terror' are as likely to challenge hegemonic representations as they are to contribute to their validation (Massana, 2020a). Her proposal purposefully departs from positions that take for granted the subversive or resistant position of theatre and reject the dichotomy of dominant vs. counter-discourse. As she highlights, "theatrical events have to be situated within – not outside of, or opposed to – the discursive formation of the 'war on terror'" (2016, p. 21). In light of the previous studies discussed, de Waal's view creates a welcome space for critically engaging with the discursive formation of the 'war on terror' – what I refer to in the context of this thesis as the epistemological framework of terror – and its relationship to theatre. In taking up her call to expand theatre

scholarship's critical engagement with the epistemological framework of terror, I propose to depart from this discursive figuration and scrutinise the potential of other under-researched and unexplored iterations of terror.

With this, de Waal's work and in particular her exploration of "the ways in which post-9/11 theatre enters into conversation with the discourse[...] rather than the historical or social realities of the 'war on terror'" (2016, p. 12) is relevant groundwork for my study. In particular, I am drawn to her conclusion that in the plays analysed in her work there are very few attempts to "render precarious subjects intelligible and recognisable" (2016, p. 267). In some respects, my thesis expands de Waal's claims which point at how the epistemological framework of terror does not allow for these precarious subjects to be intelligible or recognizable, for that, I read her conclusion as an invitation to write from a different perspective, one that renders precarious subjects recognizable and intelligible. The absence of nuanced definitions of terror outside the parameters of the hegemonic discursive formation in the aforementioned studies risks reproducing the epistemological framework of terror, perpetuating the norms of inclusion and exclusion that determine which lives are apprehended and recognized as living, and as such experiencing terror. In this regard, my work, proposes that it is time we exceed the aforementioned epistemological frame and explore terror as a lived experience, beyond the discursive formation of the 'war on terror'.

2.1.2.4. Proposed Research Path

As discussed in the previous sections, what concerns me about the existing scholarship that analyses the relationship between theatre and terror in the 21st century is the reproduction of vocabularies and images from its hegemonic epistemological frame. This tendency is problematic because it can unintentionally further the problematic conflation of terror with this particular narrative of terror in place since the aftermath of 9/11. Hodges's analysis of the 'war on terror' narrative suggests that not only did it

provide a way to speak about the US response to terrorism after 9/11 but it also regulated public discussion and debates on the topic, it provided a common language to refer to particular objects of knowledge, it constituted particular understandings of contemporary times and thus it ultimately became accepted and naturalized (2011, p. 6); this was highlighted by the lack of consensus around “adequate official definitions” of terror and terrorism within the post-9/11 context (Bharucha, 2014, p. 4). An area of enquiry unexplored in studies on contemporary British theatre is the other possible manifestations of terror and their representation on stage in the British context.

With this in mind I want to suggest that recent studies on theatre and terror which have only engaged with the aforementioned hegemonic narrative – and have therefore operated within the parameters of said narrative – have inadvertently contributed to the dissemination of its common language, especially to a particular understanding of terror concomitant with Bush’s narrative, and which obscures other experiences of terror. For the purpose of this thesis, I find particularly compelling Bharucha’s aim to “[call] attention to these other manifestations of terror, which are not determined by ‘September 11’, even though they may be affected by its fall-out” (2014, p. 3). By choosing two plays unexpected in the context of the aforementioned studies on theatre and terror, I propose to, in Jasbir K. Puar’s words “undo the naturalized [...] scripts of terror that become taken-for-granted knowledge formations” (2007, p. xv). I want to contend, therefore, that offering different examples of terror, and analysing contemporary British drama within these examples, can contribute towards the displacement of the pervading epistemological frame of terror, in place since the aftermath of 9/11. I concur with Bharucha that this endeavour risks perhaps diffusing the grammar of terror (2014, p. 9), however, when said grammar fails to express the lived experience of precarious subjects, it needs to be questioned, problematized and revised.

2.2. Queer as Method

Queerness is essentially about the rejection
of a here and now and an insistence on
potentiality for another world.
(Muñoz, 2009, p. 1)

I made the choice to be queer.
(Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 41)

This thesis positions queerness in relation to terror so that it becomes the vehicle through which to question the epistemological frame that has relegated our understanding of contemporary forms of terror solely in the context of such frame. References to gender and sexuality are not entirely new in studies on theatre and performance and the ‘war on terror’, examples include the work carried out by Sarah Brady and Ariane de Waal. By deploying feminist and queer studies, de Waal’s work notably sketches a theory of subject positions which analyses how the discursive production of the war on terror creates the figures of patriots, terrorist subject positions, “racialized masculinities and femininities [...]heteronormative and queer, heroic and victimised subjectivities” (2016, p. 13). On her part, Brady’s extensive rendering of “Bushismo”, a combination of ‘Bush’ and the Spanish term ‘machismo’ – defined as “strong or aggressive masculine pride” (Brady, 2012 p. 2) – denotes her interest in overtly exploring a particular model of masculinity embodied by George W. Bush. My interest on assembling terror and queerness together, however, does not stem from a will to analyse what de Waal and Brady have already productively highlighted, nor am I interested in working solely with queer representation on stage in plays dealing with terror, although Alabanza’s play offer such example. Instead of approaching queerness as the subject of research, I propose to convey queerness as a *method* of

research that provides the tools to question the ways in which 21st century theatre and terror have been analysed, while simultaneously providing alternative examples of embodied experiences of terror existing outside of the frame of recognition defined in the previous chapter.

In this chapter I present a series of provocations so that we shift the frame from focusing on what is queer(ness) to how queer(ness) is done. This proposal is inspired firstly by the “methodological renaissance” experienced by queer studies (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016, p. 14), and secondly, by a tradition of feminist and queer critical enquiry that calls for “a politics of location as a form of situated dwelling” (Ahmed, 2006b) since, as Sara Ahmed reminds us, “[f]eminist, queer, and critical race philosophers have shown us how social differences are the effects of how bodies inhabit spaces with others” (ibid.). Ahmed’s emphasis on the situated dwelling reveals the oftentimes obscured position of the researcher vis-à-vis their object of study, a relationship that is asymmetric, traversed with power dynamics, complex and messy. I want to suggest that queering method can reveal this relationship, a suggestion I will further explore in the second interval. Together with a will to productively look at what queerness as a methodology can offer to the study of contemporary drama and its interjections with terror, a second reason for the reclaiming of queer as method has to do with answering to the recent backlash against queer identities and queer studies in Spanish media and academia. Similarly worrying are the recent examples of transphobia both on British media and academia which are put forward by trans-exclusionary, gender critical, radical feminists. The most recent and worrying example is current UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s decision to block the recent gender recognition bill passed by the Scottish Parliament, which would allow trans people in Scotland to change their gender through a system of self-identification (Crerar & Brooks, 2023). In the face of the exclusion of particularly trans women from discourses on feminism in Britain, and the strand of vilification of queer theory in Spanish academia, reclaiming queer theory is

not only timely but necessary.¹⁷ In short, the aim of this chapter is to present what is understood as queer methodologies and to propose how using queer studies can help us illuminate otherwise unexamined aspects about terror in contemporary British theatre. In order to do so, I will first look at recent genealogies of queerness, followed by a review of how queer methodologies have been applied to theatre studies. In the final part of this chapter, I will sketch what a queer method for the study of theatre and terror might look like. In drafting a queer methodology for an alternative approach to terror, the discussions interwoven in this chapter and through the thesis engage with queer ideas of livability and worldmaking.

2.2.1. Queer Methodologies and British Theatre

Studies working on the intersections of queerness and drama in the British context have focused mostly on an analysis of the representation of gay and lesbian characters on stage (de Jongh, 1992; S. Freeman, 1997; Godiwala, 2007; Sinfield, 1999; Wylie, 2009) or on the representations of queer mythologies in the work of particular playwrights (Godiwala, 2006), and they have primarily analysed twentieth century theatre, in particular plays that, as Enric Monforte suggests, “bear witness to the complex, painful (de)construction of the homosexual character” (Monforte, 2014 p. 152).¹⁸ Such studies have tackled plays dealing with AIDS, responses to Section 28 and

¹⁷ The backlash against queer identities and queer studies in Spanish media and academia came to the fore exponentially after the 2019 Feminist Summer School Rosario Acuña (University of Gijón) where several speakers presented papers against queer theory, which they see as the tools for the erasure of cisgender women and lesbian identities and the re-centering of masculinity via the inclusion of trans women in women-only spaces. After the circulation of some of the derogatory comments against trans women made by speakers during their presentations, the discussion was taken over by several media, in most cases contributing to a misinterpretation of queer theory and to a discourse that was at best misinformed and at worst clearly transphobic. The conflict escalated further as public discussions for the passing of a state-wide trans law were held, with traditional trans ally political parties taking strong polarized positions against it. For an appraisal of this conflict see Mayor et al., 2021; Mora, 2021.

¹⁸ Godiwala’s comprehensive study on Pam Gems defines queer mythologies, following Sinfield’s definition of queerness, as “those of gender, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality which challenge the status quo of the dominant white middleclass mainstream [and] severely contest the white patriarchal traditions of British drama” (2006, p. 10)

Godiwala 2007 offers two exceptions to this time frame worth noting. Catherine MacNamara’s chapter “Transgendered Masculinities in Performance: Subcultural Narratives Laid Bare” looks at

other policies implemented by Margaret Thatcher,¹⁹ the entanglements of capitalism and homosexuality or the representation of lesbian identity, defining queer theatre as

a more radical position [which] clearly drawing on poststructuralism, will actively work to deconstruct such a fixed [sexual] identity, arguing that such an existence is impossible in contemporary, fragmented societies and focusing instead on how the subversive potential of elements such as fluidity, instability and performativity create meaning (Monforte, 2007, p. 198).

Most recent work, bridging the twentieth and twenty-first century, includes Stephen Greer's *Contemporary British Queer Performance* (2012), which focuses on performance practices (including but not focusing exclusively on drama) from the early 1990s to the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Greer's volume offers a theorisation of queer performance that considers representation of queer characters on stage and the staging of queer histories, as well as the performance of queer protest or an analysis of the material conditions of production in queer festivals. Greer's discussion of the term queer is grounded on early queer theory. He highlights the nuances and dangers of transforming queerness into a homogenising discourse that "serve[s] existing hierarchies of power" (2012, p. 4) and recognises that "the aim of a queer analysis – or the product of one – may be to make clear the existence of that history and challenge the rhetorical opposition of what is 'transparent' or 'natural' and what is 'derivative' or 'contrived'" (2012, p. 12).

Concurrently, recent publications have taken upon themselves the task of sketching what a queer methodology might look like, especially in the field of social

examples of transgendered masculinities on stage between 1999 and 2005. In section two of the book, titled "Queer Television", Tony Purvis's chapter focuses on "The Queer Subjects of Twenty-First Century Television Drama in Britain". However, despite these exceptions, the book's main interest and focus is with post-war drama and offers little contextualization for the few examples of 21st century theatre or television representations.

¹⁹ Section 28 was introduced by the Tory Government of Margaret Thatcher as an amendment to the Local Government Act of 1986. This law stated that no public money should be spent on the promotion of homosexuality in schools or elsewhere, as well as prevented local authorities from promoting a homosexual lifestyle as a pretend family relationship. The legislation, which was Thatcher's response to "those who believed they had an inalienable right to be gay" (Godfrey, 2018), was finally abolished in 2003 and although nobody was prosecuted under the legislation, it was continually targeted by anti-discrimination campaigners and queer theatre practitioners.

sciences (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016; Dadas, 2016; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019; Liinason & Kulpa, 2008; Nash & Browne, 2010). Grating against or generating tension with the “antimethodological impulse of queer studies” (Love, 2016, p. 347), according to Hannah MacCann, “queer methodology is about troubling the subject, employing a queer reading approach, and drawing from multiple perspectives and traditions, all in order to challenge “dominant logics.”(2016, p. 236). Inspired by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s text “Sex in Public” (1998), and in particular their suggestion that queer social practices – ranging from sex to theory – have the capacity to challenge norms that support heteronormativity as well as other practices “implicated in hierarchies of property and propriety” (1998, p. 548), McCann defends that “queer theory provides a theoretical lens through which to maintain a commitment to challenging subject boundaries and dominant paradigms” (2016, p. 238), a theoretical lens that is vital for a critique of the conditions of the present. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that an important tension within the entanglement of queer forms of enquiry with the academy has to do with the extent towards which the “insularity of the university” (Love, 2016, p. 348) drifts away from the lived experiences of queer communities. This tension, Heather Love sustains, is “material [...] and here to stay” (2016 p. 347). As she concludes:

Scholarship always involves the betrayal of the communities whose experience we claim to represent. But for those of us working inside the academy and pursuing academic scholarship, acknowledging the betrayal and its costs is crucial. From the perspective of a radical queer tradition, the turn to method can seem like surrender, the final capitulation to business as usual. But avowing our place as academics may be paradoxically necessary to recognizing what in the world is *not academic*; the ongoing struggles for survival that exceed our methods, our countermethods, and our antimethods. (2016, p. 348; emphasis in original)

Love therefore invites us to recognize the contradictions and the tensions inherent in the pairing ‘queer’ and ‘method’, what Jane Ward has declared to be “a productive

oxymoron” (2016, p. 72), as an integral part of this form of enquiry, that is, they invite us to render visible the discomfort of a situated critical knowledge, as will be discussed in Interval no. 2.

In the field of British theatre studies, there are still few examples of the use of queer methodologies for the analysis of drama.²⁰ However, I want to suggest that the work carried out by Ariane de Waal (2016) and Stephen Greer (2019), while not being explicitly situated in the field of queer methodology, has paved the way for the expansion of the use of queer as a mode of enquiry within the field. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ariane de Waal’s monograph *Theatre on Terror: Subject Positions in British Drama* (2016) analyses theatre on the ‘war on terror’ with a particular focus on the construction of gendered subject positions in British drama after 9/11, applying methodologies from gender and queer studies to the analysis of subject positions. In particular, her monograph contains chapters that focus on “(Un)Grieving Femininities” (2016, p. 118), “Traumatised Masculinities” (2016, p. 138), “Appropriating Afghan Femininities” (2016, p. 186) and “Military Masculinities” (2016, p. 244). On his part, Stephen Greer’s *Queer Exceptions: Solo Performance in Neoliberal Times* (2019), on post-millennial solo performance, and in particular his invitation to start research situated within “a field of feminist and queer enquiry” (2019, p. 2) is central for the intervention this thesis wants to make in that the work is permeated by queer methods. As Greer states in the introduction, the book “sets out to trace the cultural significance of exceptional, threshold subjects who are neither wholly excluded nor fully assimilated, and instead occupy a suspended relation to the social and political sphere” (2019, p. 2); these threshold subjects include the martyr (2019, p. 50), the pariah (2019, p. 79), the killjoy (2019, p.106), the stranger (2019, p. 132), the misfit (2019, p. 161) and the optimist (2019, p.189), and their thorough analysis serves Greer to provide a critique of

²⁰ While their focus is not text-based drama, it is worth noting that the recent publication *The Palgrave Handbook of Queer and Trans Feminisms in Contemporary Performance* (Rosenberg, D’Urso, & Winget, 2021) features some discussion on queer feminist methodologies in their analysis of live performance with some examples from the British context. In particular, I will be referring to the chapter “Activating Cis-White Fragility: The Oppositional Gaze in Travis Alabanza’s *Left Outside Alone*” (Tadman, 2021) in my discussion on Travis Alabanza’s *Burgerz*.

“neoliberalism’s gaps, inconsistencies and contradictions” (2019, p.2). While Greer draws on a broad range of critical sources, he straightforwardly expresses that his work has “queer ambitions” (ibid.) in that he draws from feminist and queer fields of enquiry that open up “what counts as a life worth living” (Ahmed as cited in Greer, 2019, p. 2) and takes his critical enquiry “beyond the territories of sexuality and gender most intimate to queer studies in order to think more broadly about the contemporary conditions of exception” (2019, p. 3), an opening up of the signifier queer running parallel with second wave queer theory. More importantly, Greer sustains that while the initial approach to exceptionality in his work comes from Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito, he nonetheless adopts a “queer scavenger methodology” (Halberstam in Greer, 2015, p. 11) through the combination of perspectives and insights from diverse fields of enquiry, a concept to which I will return in Interval no. 1.

Both Greer’s focus on what counts as a life worth living, as well as de Waal’s analysis – as mentioned in the previous chapter – of the extent to which theatre on terror attempts to “render precarious subjects intelligible and recognisable” (2016, p. 276), point towards one of the main elements identified by Ghaziani and Brim as a central aspect of queer methods: livability. As they state, they “envision a dual mandate for queer methods: *to outline the conditions of queer worldmaking and to clarify, but not overdetermine, the conditions that make live livable*” (2019, p. 7; emphasis in original). As will be developed throughout this chapter, the concept of livability, together with renderings of queer worldmaking, queer orientations, queer reading practices, and the embrace of messiness and the erotics will constitute the central axis that will conform the queer methodology prevalent in this study.

2.2.2. Genealogies of Queerness: Second Wave Queer Theory and the Subjectless Critique

The last few years have seen the publication of different articles, special issues and volumes reassessing the future or alternative paths for queer studies, oftentimes in formulations that put emphasis on the temporalities of queerness, establishing its past and speculating about its future. Whereas in an attempt to reclaim the reparative work of memory (Castiglia & Reed, 2011, p. 14) or ascertain the future as queerness' domain (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1), the archaeology and genealogies of queerness are reclaimed while normative chronologies are questioned and interrogated to the point of collapse. Most of these writings emerged as the result of the mainstreaming of lesbian and gay identity due to media representation – with constant references to shows such as *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, or the Bravo production of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* – consumerist culture and legal advances such as marriage equality. While activists propose more hands-on solutions, as those presented in Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore's edited collection *That's Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation* (2008), enquiries in the realm of academia have opted for stretching the capacities of a queer mode of enquiry beyond sexuality to ask what other aspects can queer theory trouble itself with. Thus, David L. Eng, Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz ask about “What's Queer about Queer Studies *Now*” (2005; my emphasis), while Janet Halley and Andrew Parker wonder what comes *after* sex (2011; my emphasis). *Social Text's* special issue, edited by Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz, interrogates queer scholarship on the political promise and utility of queer (2005, p. 1) expanding the field of queer studies beyond sexuality and claiming for the necessity of a “renewed queer studies” (2005, p. 1) that while retaining the political promise of queerness – which “resided specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms” (ibid.) – could respond not only to challenges raised by sexuality but also to other late 20th century and early 21st century global crises, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion. In their words,

A renewed queer studies [...] insists on a broadened consideration of the late-twentieth-century global crises that have configured historical relations among political economies, the geopolitics of war and terror, and national manifestations of sexual, racial, and gendered hierarchies. (ibid.)

The volume's examination of the limits of queer epistemology – understood as the study of queer knowledge production – the potentials of queer diasporas, and the emergence of queer liberalism reassessed the relevance of queer theory in a moment when the argument that gay rights had been won and gays were everywhere started to be ever-present.²¹ Particularly relevant for this study is their re-evaluation of “the utility of queer as an engaged mode of critical enquiry” (2005, pp. 1–2), and the critical attention they pay to “governing logics of knowledge production” (2005, p. 4). By revising the pasts (specially via Butler's 1993 essay “Critically Queer”), presents and possible futures of queer epistemologies, the editors assessed that “queer has no fixed political referent”, a mode of enquiry they referred to as the “subjectless critique” of queer studies, which according to them is “one of the field's key theoretical and political promises” (2005, p. 4). Despite appearing innovative, this argument was already present in Michael Warner's edited volume *Fear of a Queer Planet. Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993). Warner's suggestion that queer politics should focus on “a wide field of normalization” and his rejection of “minoritizing logics of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favour of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (Warner, 1993, p. xxvi) stems from the conviction that “people want to make theory queer, not just have a theory about queers” (ibid.).

In a response to this proposition based on the reading of the subjectless critique as too vague, Kadji Amin proposes we ground queerness to its affective histories, so as to prevent depoliticising the term, and states:

²¹ This has been picked also by Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier in the introduction to their volume *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer*. For further references check note 6 in their introductory chapter (2016, pp. 20–21).

Avowing the affective histories of queer—which often display themselves less through explicit claims than in affective dispositions toward and away from certain terms—would require our willingness to admit that queer is not endlessly open-ended, polyvalent, and reattachable. Instead, it is a term sticky with history, one that bears the impression, in its characteristic gestures, dispositions, and orientations, of its travels in time and space. (2016, p. 181)

Indeed, as Amin reminds us, “neither the political urgency nor the transgressive effects of queer can be taken for granted” (2016, p. 182). Grounding queer in its radical and transgressive origins “orients it toward particular political and intellectual projects in the present” (ibid.). In this sense, queer has to be understood primordially as having the generative capacity to challenge established norms and present alternatives to it, which is a way to keep it grounded to its transgressive origins. While I agree with Amin’s reclaiming of the affective histories of queer, some of his further arguments seem to miss existing power structures within academia, that I think are worth bringing up. According to Amin, “keeping *queer’s* affective histories intact” (2016, p. 181; emphasis in original) can take queer studies further. However, his arguments privilege a ‘queer canon’ consisting on the work produced within the field in the western Anglophone context in general, and the US in particular. His argument to defend such privileging is based on the fact that queer scholarship produced outside Anglophone contexts, especially in the so-called ‘global south’ “examines sites in which queer operates in markedly different ways from what has been canonized within queer studies” (ibid.). Paying attention to the way in which language use, geographies and university adscription work in the production of knowledge would be desirable in an argument that is centred on the political possibilities of queer studies (not to mention queer activism). Amin’s argument would benefit from taking into consideration the privileging of publications written in English, or the lack of accessibility to the Anglophone queer canon when this is published behind a paywall or in unaffordable academic hardback books. As Nash and Browne have also highlighted, “there is a

geography to queer thinking” (2010, p. 7), and Amin’s argument falls into the trap of essentialising queer theory to an imperative of “the right kind of queer” (ibid.).²²

In Amin’s critique, there is a slight misapprehension of the subjectless critique as the “literal evacuation of bodies” (Lim & Nyong’o, 2020 p. 152), yet, as Eng-Bem Lim and Tavia Nyong’o state, “[s]ubjectless critique is not as much the obliteration of the subject or its corporeality as it is a tactic to engage and exceed the subject’s formalization in the discourse” (ibid.), that is, a form of queer critique that aims to broaden the scope of queer studies. Still, Amin’s argument brings to the fore an underlying question behind this ‘broadening scope’, one voiced also by Lim and Nyong’o: “what is left of sex in this latest queer program?” (2020, p. 153). In that sense, while a thorough answer to this question goes beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to keep it in mind so as not to depoliticize the term queer. David L. Eng and Jasbir K. Puar return to the potential of the subjectless critique in the special issue of *Social Text* “Left of Queer” (Eng & Puar, 2020) where they suggest that subjectless critique “opened a space for a multiplicity of subjects and for queer representation and [...] their ongoing deconstruction” (2020, p. 1), and claim that this subjectless critique is in turn a form to resist homonormative and homonationalist subjects who “continue to be interpellated into the logics of queer liberalism and pinkwashing” which pathologize and abandon all those who do not fit into the “normative queer liberal rights project” (Eng & Puar, 2020, p. 3). Simultaneously, a queer subjectless critique interrogates the multiple arrangements of race and sex and renders visible the exclusionary operations of a queer politics focused exclusively on “politics of incremental recognition” (Eng & Puar, 2020, p. 5). According to Eng and Puar, this focus creates systems, such as the US legal system which, while recognizing intentional discrimination that harms an identifiable individual, are “not designed to address intersectional identities and group injury nor [are they] capable of redressing material

²² For some noteworthy recent work on queer theory beyond the Anglophone world see for instance Falconi Trávez, 2018; Falconi Trávez, Castellanos, & Viteri, 2014; Mérida Jiménez, 2011; Mora, 2021; Preciado, 2019; Vila & Sáez, 2019)

inequalities such as the maldistribution of life chances and the ethical conditions by which life might be livable” (Eng & Puar, 2020, p. 6). The turn to subjectless critique problematizes the unitary subject of queer studies and refuses to reduce queer theory to sexuality. In that sense, it concurs with Heather Love when she states that

These days, queer is not only about race, class, gender, ethnicity, and nation, but is also about affect, citizenship, the death drive, diaspora, digitality, disability, empire, friendship, globalization, the impersonal, indirection, kinship, living underground, loss, marginality, melancholia, migration, neoliberalism, pedagogy, performativity, publicity, self-shattering, shame, shyness, sovereignty, subversion, temporality, and terrorism. (2011, p. 182)

It is this semantic flexibility of queer, rooted in theories of intersectionality and assemblage, that I want to draw upon, one that is in touch with the origins of queer studies, and that expands it beyond sexuality without renouncing to it. To quote Love again, “[d]espite its uptake into any number of banal and commoditized contexts, the word [queer] still maintains its ability to move, to stay outside, and to object to the world as it is given” (ibid). I propose, therefore, to remain invested in the oppositional politics of queerness. With this in mind, this study takes on Heather Berg’s invitation to implement a “tactical” use of the subjectless critique, that is, in “approaching queerness as a way of thinking (sideways, or otherwise)” (2015, p. 23). Therefore, a queer subjectless critique does not focus only on queer subjects, but on how the use of queer principles of disrupting binaries, exploring multitudes of desires and deviances and non-normativity can be a generative source of potentially liberatory contestations and practices; in short, a form of resistance to the normative queer liberal rights project that contributes to the pathologizing, exclusion and abandonment of precarious and dispossessed groups.²³

²³ For an early suggestion that queerness liberatory practices and the radical potential of queer politics should be based on an analysis of power rather than a sense of a common shared identity

2.2.3. The Antisocial Thesis and The Affective Turn: Dismantling a Binary

As mentioned above, Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz's interrogation about the future of queer studies is also echoed in Janet Halley and Andrew Parker's 2011 volume *After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory* where they explicitly identify two strands within recent queer studies: the antisocial thesis – also known as the Bersanian project – and the affective turn which they also refer to as the Sedgwickian project (2011, p. 9).²⁴ The antisocial thesis, attributed to Leo Bersani, explores, via a critique of Foucault and the psychoanalytic proposals of Jacques Lacan, how social bonds might be broken by the queer subject's sexual pulsion. Bersani's thesis on antirelationality, initially sketched in his text "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1987), suggested that the negative sexuality represented by sexual minorities was a threat to the social that should be explored before it was neutralized by assimilation via the fight for equal rights in arenas such as the equal marriage or the recognition of civil partnerships. As Tim Dean puts it, "[h]omosexuality can be viewed as threatening because, insofar as we fail to reproduce the family in a recognizable form, queers fail to reproduce the social" (Caserio 2006, p. 826). This has been further explored by Lee Edelman (2005) who, by focusing on the problematic relationship between the queer subject, sex and the figure of 'the child', establishes a link between queerness, the lack of futurity and the death-drive.²⁵

The affective turn within queer studies was first explored in the "Queer Bonds" conference that took place at the University of California, Berkeley, in February 2009 where the organizers aimed to "undo some of the acrimony of the debate around the so-called antisocial thesis" (Weiner & Young, 2011, p. 224). Throughout the

see Cathy J. Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" (Cohen, 1997).

²⁴ While this distinction has been accepted by many scholars within queer studies others such as Lorenzo Bernini suggest that queer theories can be classified instead in three different paradigms which in turn result in three different proposals of political action: "revolutionary Freudian Marxism" represented by the work of Mario Mieli, "radical constructivism" represented by the works of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, and "antisocial theories" represented by Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman. (2017, p. 11)

²⁵ For further references see: Bersani, 1996; Caserio et al., 2006 and Edelman, 2005.

conference, and in the subsequent special issue edited in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, scholars explored “the bonds that appear under different conditions of negation” and the “interplay between a centrifugal drive away from sociality and a centripetal pressure toward sociable belonging and linkage” (Weiner & Young, 2011, p. 223). Central to their discussion in particular, and to queer studies at large, is the tension between “queer world-making and [queer] world-shattering” (Weiner & Young, 2011, p. 224) That is, a tension between proposals for new forms of collectivity versus the threat to the social that supposedly queer theory represents. The authors’ discarding of such binary is based on the premise that the negative or the oppositional need not always be antisocial. Similarly, Halley and Parker suggest that the affective turn offers “an open-ended or exploratory trajectory, a distrust and avoidance of yes/no structures, luxuriantly sensuous writing... and an intense focus on political and psychic dysphoria” (2011, p. 9), the same focus they attribute to the anti-social thesis. In short, both the conclusions reached at the conference and the complication of the distinction expressed by Halley and Parker show that the binary distinction between antirelational theories and the affective turn cannot be sustained. Indeed, as Weiner and Young maintain, “such a binary presents a false choice, as if queer social negativity engendered no bonds and queer collectivities did not take place precisely in relation to some negation or incommensurability within the social” (2011b, p. 224). This notwithstanding, I find it important to incorporate and embrace Angela Jones’s critique of the antisocial turn as the focus on negativity “ignores at worst and neglects at best the necessity of emancipatory politics for many queers whose material conditions make embracing the negative a political privilege or luxury” (A. Jones, 2013).²⁶ In this sense, it is relevant to highlight that most of the scholars this thesis draws upon have devoted a great part of their recent work to affect(s). This coincides with the so-called “turn to

²⁶ Jones’s strong and straightforward critique of the antirelational school of queer theory is grounded on Leo Bersani’s and Lee Edelman’s critique of the tyrannical force that, according to them, results from the mandate of compassion they see in queer futurity. As Jones’s puts it, “[t]he antirelational strain of queer theory condemns relationality and the idea that individuals – who are driven by empathy – will come together in collective action” (2013, p. 8).

affect” in the humanities and social sciences more broadly, which has been seen as “a response to perceived omissions in poststructuralist thought with regards to embodiment, materiality and (ethical) responsibility” (Aragay, Delgado-García, & Middeke, 2021, p. 3).

As Weiner and Young’s problematization of the false binary between positions for and against the social suggests, and despite the urge to periodize theoretical trends, scholars and activists working on queerness, feminisms and critical race theory have been engaging with affect since before the affective turn. The often-unacknowledged legacy of writers and activists doing affect before white western scholars turned to it needs to be reclaimed and recognized, as does Sara Ahmed when she grounds her figure of the “feminist killjoy” in the work of Audre Lorde and bell hooks (2010a, p. 39). As Lynette Goddard states, while also discussing their work

Although neither hooks nor Lorde uses the term ‘affect’, their Black feminist work on confronting racism is affective in nature *and* subject matter; it is about dealing with difficult emotions such as rage and anger and about galvanising one’s affective and emotional responses in the service of feminist political action and activism. Their use of terms such as ‘anger’, ‘pain’, ‘fear’ and ‘rage’ signals to the affective bodily responses, feelings and thoughts related to ‘talking about race’ and racism. [...] The centrality of affect and feeling in their contributions pre-empts some of the preoccupations of the more recent turn to affect in the humanities and allows us to situate more recent affect theory work within a lineage of Black feminist scholarship. (Goddard, 2021b, p. 108; emphasis in original).

To the Black feminist legacy identified by Goddard, I want to add that recent affect theory can and should also be situated in a lineage of queer scholarship, and in particular queer scholarship that intersects with critical race theory. Indeed, as Eng and Puar sustain, Black queer and feminist critique has been essential to formulations of subjectless critique (,2020, p. 8). Most importantly for this study, I want to highlight,

following Fatima El-Tayeb, that queer of colour critique, as a mode of analysis, “requires us to remain flexible and attentive to context” (Hanhardt et al., 2020). This broad and context-bound understanding of queerness is also evoked in Cathy J Cohen’s early meditations and intersectional approach to render visible the interlocking systems of oppression that interact to regulate the lives of people, a conclusion she reached by establishing a conversation between early queer theory and black lesbian, bisexual and straight feminist scholars such as Lorde or hooks. An alternative genealogy is thus established in the interstices of these disciplines by looking at the work of black women scholars who rendered visible waves of collective feeling through their musings on intersecting forms of oppression.

The connections between queerness and affect are multiple. As Kadji Amin succinctly expresses, “[t]he method that orients what may be felicitously named queer is [...] fundamentally affective: it is a matter of sensing some resonance between one’s object of study and the inchoate cluster of feelings that inhabit and animate the term queer” (2016, p. 173). Of all the vectors of interest and orientations in approaches to affect identified by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader* – they identify at least eight – the one that will permeate this thesis in the drafting of a queer methodology is

found in the regularly hidden-in-plain-sight politically engaged work – perhaps most often undertaken by feminists, queer theorists, disability activists, and subaltern peoples living under the thumb of a norrnativizing power – that attends to the hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and flowing ephemera, of the daily and the workaday, of everyday and every-night life, and of “experience” (understood in ways far more collective and “external” rather than individual and interior), where persistent, repetitious practices of power can simultaneously provide a body (or, better, collectivized bodies) with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm. (2010, p. 7)

This vector of affect theory and writings on queer methodologies in the humanities share a discursive register, key words and ideas. It is this capacious understanding of queerness, one grounded on affect, that I want to mobilize in drafting a queer methodology for the study of lived experiences of terror in contemporary British theatre.

2.2.4. Queer Orientations: A Queer Methodology for the Analysis of Theatre

Despite the overall foregoing complexities of pinning down what a queer methodology entails, undertaking research informed by queerness extends several key methodological principles that will be presented in this section and foregrounded in this study. Central to this methodological approach, as Hanna McCann suggests, is the fact that “queer methods involve a queer orientation.” (2016, p. 225). As per Sara Ahmed’s work on queer orientations, these not only reveal the relationship between desire and its object – that is, they should not only be read in terms of sexual orientation – but they also affect what bodies can do, as “in desiring certain objects, other things follow, given how the social is already arranged” (2006a, p. 563). Succinctly put, Ahmed’s argument, to which I adhere, upholds a spatial metaphor according to which orientations are a matter of how we reside in space. On that account, sexual orientation can be understood as a matter of “how we inhabit spaces as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we inhabit spaces with” (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 1). These orientations, in turn, allow Ahmed to articulate how bodies are turned towards specific objects around them. However, if or when our bodies turn towards objects that are not supposed to be there, these orientations become queer orientations. Following that, we can sustain that queer orientations open up other ways of facing the world.

Ahmed connects this to queer cultures’ alternative forms of world making, as “they draw different kinds of lines, which do not aim to keep things in their places” (2006a, p. 565), even if she is rather suspicious of the idealization and location of queer

worlds in alternative spaces; instead, she suggests sliding into disorientation. Her proposal is based on retaining the two senses of the word queer: queer as “what is oblique or off-line or even just plain wonky” (ibid.) and queer as “nonstraight sexual practices” (ibid.). Retaining these two senses would allow us to “twist between sexual and social registers” (ibid.), consequently then, sexual disorientation would lead to social disorientation, which according to Ahmed interrupts the dynamic of how things are arranged, resulting in what is familiar becoming “rather strange” (ibid.). As will be introduced in Interval no. 1, and explored through the thesis, approaching terror through the frame of queer (dis)orientation results in making the epistemological framework previously discussed strange, and allows for the appearance of alternative forms of understanding terror. Another important aspect of this, also highlighted by McCann, is the fact that adopting a queer methodology allows for a rereading of the present (2016, p. 235), a nod to the treatment of time which connects with an aspect that will be central to the thesis and further developed in the coming interval, which is an interest and preoccupation with queer temporalities and what their analysis reveals in the study of the plays discussed in Act Two. Together with this, as I will sketch in the rest of the chapter, the methodological principles that will be used in the thesis in order to slide into disorientation are queer reading practices, acknowledging messiness and a focus on livability and worldmaking.

2.2.4.1. Queer Reading Practices

A pertinent premise for this study is McCann’s suggestion that a queer methodology should follow a “queer reading practice” (2016, p. 233) a proposal inspired by the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) and Jack Halberstam (2018) which suggests that a queer reading practice involves reading with the aim of “decentering [...] regimes of normality” (McCann, 2016, p. 233) One of the most adequate proposals of a queer reading practice for this thesis is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s project of “reparative reading” (2003, p. 123) sketched in her text "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,

Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You", included in her book *Touching Feeling*. Taking as a starting point some of the theories surrounding the natural history of HIV that sustained the virus had been deliberately created and spread, Sedgwick establishes a contrast, sometimes phrased in terms of a continuation,²⁷ between paranoid reading and reparative reading. More than establishing a clear dichotomy between these two forms, what is interesting about Sedgwick is that she reminds us that, although traditionally privileged and understood as *the* form of critical theoretical enquiry, paranoid reading is "one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds" (2003, p. 126). I quote Sedgwick at length to fully grasp the scope of reparative reading:

to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (2003, p. 146)

What I find most enabling about Sedgwick's proposal is the possibility of opening an avenue of interpretation that privileges reparation as a form of queer reading practice, especially because, contrary to paranoid reading practices, reparative reading practices do not reproduce the same structures that they are meant to critique.

²⁷ In this sense it is important to note that Sedgwick does not base her proposal on sustaining a binary opposition between paranoid and reparative readings. In her text, she acknowledges the fact that in some cases, her possibility to offer a reparative reading stems from previous research informed by a paranoid methodology.

That succinctly entails (1) reading queerness into texts not perceived as queer, which following McCann's reading of Sedgwick contributes towards enduring "the challenges of identifying as queer in a world where queer is violently targeted and obscured" (2016, p. 233); and (2) locating queerness in texts where queer desire or queer themes would be difficult to see; in short, queer reading practices disclose what is obscured and bring it to the surface. Following that, McCann concludes that a queer methodology "is about troubling the subject, employing a queer reading approach, and drawing from multiple perspectives and traditions, all in order to challenge 'dominant logics'" (2016, p. 236). In short, a queer reading practice contributes towards decentring regimes of normality.

2.2.4.2. Messiness and the Erotics

Heather Love sustains that "queer scholarship [has] dealt centrally with untidy issues like desire, sexual practice, affect, sensation, and the body" and it has "struggled continually to resist [...] normal business in the academy" (2016, p. 345). This 'messiness', as Love identifies it, has led to the invention of new forms of research, writing and performance that could address the conditions of embodied life (2016, p. 345). As voiced by Michael Warner, "[f]or academics, being interested in queer theory is a way to mess up the desexualized spaces of the academy, exude some rut, reimagine the publics from which and for which academic intellectuals write, dress, and perform" (as cited in Love, 2016, p. 345). In the field of theatre studies, this has mostly been explored in relation to Performance as Research, (PaR) on the basis of the fact that "[t]he methodological and philosophical impulses of PaR make space for a range of research methods inherently bound up with the researcher as an individual and the materiality of lived experience within research" (Campbell & Farrier, 2015, p. 83). In particular, Campbell and Farrier suggest that queer mess "is to do with asserting the value and pleasure of formations of knowledge that sit outside long-standing institutional hierarchies of research" (ibid.). Accordingly, this resists the sanitary

boundaries of academia, undoubtedly marking PaR as already queer, and already messy, largely because these methods are embodied, which for Campbell and Farrier connect messiness to erotics.

Their appraisal of erotics is understood, following Georges Bataille, as “both desire and excess” (2015, p. 83). For Bataille, “eroticism constitutes one of those experiences in which the fundamental form of the human is brought into question [... it] connotes a tearing, an opening on to something entirely other, the abjection of being before an experience which appears sovereign” (Botting & Wilson, 1997, pp. 12–13). Adhering to this connection between messiness and erotics, I propose to incorporate to this correlation Audre Lorde’s understanding of the erotic as a subject position performed and inhabited by all, that challenges dominant power structures; a definition that interrogates Western masculinist renderings of the erotic that framed women in a position of alterity (2017, p. 22). Juxtaposing Lorde to Bataille renders visible the heteromascularity and cisnormativity that permeates Bataille’s thought and practice, and foregrounds how his account of eroticism and transgression is flawed because it remains “bound to the fetishization of male violence and heterosexuality” (Stapleton, 2021, p. 117).²⁸ Yet reading Bataille within a queer framework – in a reading practice that does not dismiss the flaws of his account²⁹ – is productive for an understanding of erotics as a messy opening on to the other. Bataille defines eroticism as “assenting to life up to the point of death” (1962, p. 11), qualifying that there remains a connection between death and sexual excitement. Together with that, he defines sexuality as either genital and reproductively oriented – and as such, productive within a capitalist society – or perverse – and as such, a waste within capitalism. This crucially resonates with “that queer resistance which seeks, among other things, to decenter the link between

²⁸ I wish to thank Miquel A. Riera for sharing with me his misgivings about Bataille’s cis-heteronormative account of eroticism.

²⁹ Downing and Gillett define these flaws as Bataille’s “patent inability to think outside the most unreconstructed patriarchal stereotypes of women and his unquestioning adherence to the dominance/ submission paradigm [which] constitute an insurmountable barrier to the kind of proto-deconstructive thinking that made queer possible Without the crucial input of feminist theory, it is likely that queer would never have made the critical transition from identity politics to anti-identitarian intersectionality” (Downing & Gillett, 2011, p. 102).

(hetero)sex and social progress and to rethink the relationship between sexuality, sexual citizenship and politics” (Downing & Gillett, 2011, p. 89).³⁰

Conspicuously, Campbell and Farrier have usefully suggested that “unruly erotics in research are about sensations and the production of knowledge”, as well as about identity formation “in and around the research (er/s)” (Campbell & Farrier, 2015, p. 83).³¹ Within the context of queer performance, they observe that the live encounter of the theatre “produces an erotics between bodies through corporeal sensation” (ibid.). In particular, they suggest that queer methods

“include a sensitivity to the value of low-ranking quotidian forms of knowledge and embodiment [...], the normalizing of temporalities, the politics and aesthetics of failure, a positioning that embodies the ‘negative’, avowing desire and erotics in performance, and an attraction to excess as a node in knowledge production” (Campbell & Farrier, 2015, p. 84)

I want to connect messiness and the erotics in theatre to the worlds that emerge when we bring the figure of the spectator in the discussion of drama. Most particularly, the correlation established between messiness, erotics and “the politics and aesthetics of failure” (ibid.). There are a lot of questions surrounding spectatorship, amongst them those that I find more pressing are how to approach the study of spectatorship without generalizing or being purely speculative; how to think about spectatorship without homogenising the spectating bodies, and invisibilising experiences; and how to include gender, racial and class differences in thinking about the spectator. To this, it is important to add what position does the body of the researcher occupy. Writing about the importance of Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed reminds us that “[e]ach time that you

³⁰ Downing and Gillett examine the connections between Bataille and queerness further, in particular with the antisocial turn in queer studies, and sustain that “[t]he emphasis placed by certain queer activists precisely on eroticism is therefore oppositional in exactly the same way that Bataille’s texts from *Histoire de l’oeil* onwards had been oppositional. And the insistence of certain sections of the queer community on extreme sexual practices, including sado-masochism and the death-dealing of ‘barebacking’, as sites of radical freedom and intellectual resistance, seems to have a strong preecho above all in Bataille’s pornographic fiction” (Downing & Gillett, 2011, p. 89)

³¹ For an appraisal of the relationship between the researcher’s body and erotics in queer historiographic research see Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010)

write or you speak you are putting yourself into a world that is shared” (2017a, p. v). But as I have suggested elsewhere, the moment the body of the researcher enters the equation of theatre and spectatorship, methodology is exposed as vulnerable (Massana, 2020c, p. 4). Writing on spectatorship from this position entails a being within that, as Tiffany Page suggests in her research on vulnerable writing, relocates the researcher into a space of vulnerability, one that highlights the possibilities of not-knowing and as such requires the acceptance of not-knowing as the result of the process of research, a sequence that might feel counterintuitive (2017, p. 18). In short, writing about the spectator is messy and bound to failure.³²

While this is not a thesis that focuses primarily on spectatorship, I find it important to highlight how fraught with contradictions the discussion of spectatorship is, especially since I will be referring to particular performances of the plays discussed from my own position as both researcher and spectator. With this in mind, throughout this thesis, and most importantly in Interval no.2, I aim to make visible the “unique interplay and complex temporal and spatial relations between performer and audience that occur during live performances” (Tadman, 2021, p. 171), through bringing together queer reading practices – affect-driven close readings of both texts and performances – while foregrounding and embracing the fact that queerness, as spectatorship, is indeed messy and requires failure.

2.2.4.3. Livability

The focus on livability is inspired by Judith Butler’s ongoing preoccupations with what makes a live livable, as a coming together of both a theoretical and political project. Butler tells us that “what might be understood as a shared condition of precariousness leads not to reciprocal recognition on this basis but to a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as ‘destructible’ and ‘ungrievable’” (2011, p. 383). By putting the question of livability at the centre, Butler exemplifies

³² For a recent appraisal of the figure of the spectator in contemporary Anglophone drama see Aragay, 2014; Haddow, 2019; Ridout, 2020; Rodríguez, 2019 and Tomlin, 2019.

how queerness can become something that we do, not necessarily something that we are, a position that is grounded in their constant interrogation of theoretical concepts in close connection to lived experience. In a conversation they had with Sara Ahmed, Butler lists some of the tensions within the term queer as an umbrella term for sexual dissidences and nonconforming genders – most importantly the tension between white and classist versions of queerness vs. queers of colour movements, and understandings of queerness as an expression of unfixed genders and sexualities vs. the struggle for recognition, mostly within the trans and intersex communities, of those who require a clear gender (Ahmed, 2016, p. 490) – and subsequently asks:

How do these philosophical desires become compromised or complicated if a life is considered a non-life under regimes of racism? How do we account for the experience of someone crossing national borders only to find that they are racialized in ways that never existed before? A sudden, unexpected interpellation. How does the issue of race divide those queer activists and writers who ally with struggles against racism, nationalism, war, and occupation from those who think that queer ought to become its own identity, its own discipline, and so differentiated from these other concerns and struggles? (Ahmed, 2016, p. 492)

The answer they propose to these questions is very straightforward: “It seems to me that queer has to be part of the weave of a broadening struggle” (ibid.), that is, Butler proposes “queer work that is probing the possibilities of alliance” (Ahmed, 2016, p. 489), an alliance that is based on the recognition of what makes life liveable. With this in mind, I want to suggest that at the core of the plays analysed in the second part of the thesis a fundamental question about livability is posed, a question that I borrow from Butler: “what kind of life do I want to live with others, if the life that we are seeking to live is not regarded as a life at all?” (Ahmed, 2016, p. 492).

2.2.4.4. Queer Worldmaking

The term queer worldmaking was first introduced by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in their article “Sex in Public” (Berlant & Warner, 1998) as a way to affirm a queer world which exists counter to the world of hegemonic heteronormativity. For Berlant and Warner, heterosexuality and heteronormativity involve “so many practices that are not sex that a world in which this hegemonic cluster would not be dominant is, at this point, unimaginable” (1998, p. 557). Queer worldmaking tries to bring this unimaginable world into being through a praxis that has the potential to create counter-narratives to dominant discourses. In order to do that, they propose a definition of ‘world’ that goes beyond concepts of community or group, because world

necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, project horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 558)

The political possibilities of worldmaking as a queer project are associated with Eve K. Sedgwick’s “nonce taxonomy”, a project of “the making and un making and *remaking* and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world” (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 23; emphasis in original). Yet, due to the marginal nature of queerness, these worlds have been created in ephemeral sites that, due to their mobility, have been deemed “lifestyle” rather than constitutive of worlds (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 561), such as drag shows, nightclubs, youth culture, phone-sex adds or the ballroom scene amongst others. This notwithstanding, as Nakayama and Morris sustain, “[q]ueer worldmaking takes place in all kinds of places, at all different times, involving all kinds of people, who work toward creating a different world. It is not a strategic plan, organized by anyone, but a bottom-

up engagement with the everyday” (2015, p. v). Above all, worldmaking “is a messy enterprise driven by a vision of another world, another way of living” (ibid.).

The legacy of worldmaking as fundamental praxis and politics of queerness is best found in the work of José Esteban Muñoz (Muñoz, 1999, 2009).³³ In particular, Muñoz’s work draws a line that connects queer worldmaking and performance by sustaining that “worldmaking delineates the ways in which performances – both theatrical and everyday rituals – have the ability to establish alternate views of the world” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 195), in turn, these alternate views of the world function as oppositional ideologies that criticize “oppressive regimes of truth that subjugate minoritarian people” (ibid.), and contribute towards enabling counterpublics. Quoting Muñoz at length,

[s]uch counterpublics are the aftermath of minoritarian performance. Such performances *transport* the performer *and* the spectator to a vantage point where transformation and politics are imaginable. Worldmaking performances produce these vantage points by slicing into the facade of the real that is the majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality. (1999, p. 196)

As will be further developed in the coming interval, and sustained throughout the thesis, Muñoz’s lifeline through which to imagine different possible worlds, his proposal to embrace queer life-affirming practices, and the connections he established between this and theatrical performance are fundamental for the ways in which I suggest we connect queerness, theatre and terror.

³³ Jack Halberstam's most recent research suggest a move away from the tradition of queerness as worldmaking and instead proposes to embrace collapse as part of queer aesthetics (2021). Halberstam's suggestion stems from the belief that worldmaking will only be possible if and only our current epistemologies collapse. In order to do so, Halberstam sustains that an engagement with Alvin Baltrop's photography, amongst others, orients us away from traditional figurations of the queer body and into abstract forms of desire. Provocative as this proposal is, I want to suggest that straying away from figurations of the body in the context of the plays analysed in this work, is not only problematic but also not possible. As will be shown throughout the thesis, it is precisely both the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, and the recognition of the bodies of the actors as representatives of the Other that sustain the politics of the plays.

3. Interval no. 1: Queering Theatre and/on Terror

In her short play *The Lesborryst Tapes* (2015) – later made into a short film for Channel 4 called *An Act of Terror* (2018) – playwright and poet Afshan D’souza-Lodhi presents us with the figure of the Lesborryst, a lesbian terrorist, whose main aim is to sexually terrorize the West. The short film starts with the Lesborryst dressed in a Niqab. We can only see her eyes, delineated with a metallic eye shadow for most of the duration of the film. Images of the Lesborryst are interspersed with images of different people in London – families, interracial young couples, children – who are oblivious to the plans of the Lesborryst. Her act of terror consists of transforming one of the most iconic skyscrapers in the financial district, 30 St Mary Axe, designed by Norman Foster and popularly known as the Gherkin because of its phallic shape, into a gigantic, vibrating, pink dildo. In the last scene, her make-up has changed from the metallic eye shadow delineating her eyes to a bright eye shadow reproducing the rainbow pride flag, an image that is played alongside the vibrating Gherkin.³⁴ The Lesborryst tells us that she chose to attack the Gherkin because this building represents and encapsulates capitalism and patriarchy, and attempting against it is an act against the West’s way of life. Dismantling the trope of the Muslim terrorist by exploring the idea of sexually terrorising the West, D’souza-Lodhi disrupts one of the key phrases in the narrative of terror discourse, giving a different meaning to the phrase ‘the West’s way of life’, and exploring the relationship between capitalism, patriarchy, religion and sexuality in the context of the ‘war on terror’. Together with this, D’souza-Lodhi’s project subverts what Puar calls “heteronormative penetration paradigms” by which rape is used “as a weapon of war or as a metaphor for economic exploitation” (2007, p. 47). By queering the penetration narrative, the natural ordering of capitalism, including the inevitable racial subordination within it, is deconstructed. D’souza-Lodhi’s transformation of the

³⁴ *The Lesborryst Tapes*, co-written together with Joshua Ferguson, was broadcast on Roundhouse Radio during LGBT History Month in 2013 and performed at the Edinburgh Fringe.

Gherkin into a vibrating bubble-gum pink dildo becomes a queer intervention into the economic centre of capitalist Britain, disrupting the “phallogocentric heterosexism of capitalism” (Gibson-Graham as cited in Puar, 2007, p. 47). Moreover, the fact that the terrorist behind the act is a lesbian hijabi, contributes towards the exploration of the racial dynamics of the terror narrative, as well as towards the subversion of the subordinate position of the racialised female.³⁵ I have briefly turned to D’Souza-Lodhi’s dramatic and discursive exercise, which deconstructs and unpacks the terror narrative via queerness, to exemplify through theatre what this thesis proposes to do. That is, enact a queer intervention – albeit a different one – in the hegemonic terror narrative.

In Act One, I have thoroughly defined what the hegemonic epistemological framework of terror is and provided an overview of the effects it had and the affects it generated. Together with this, I have identified what a queer methodology is and presented a series of key methodological principles that will be used in the analysis of the theatre plays. In this first interval, I return to some of the ideas presented in Act One to outline in what ways a queer methodology can be productive for an exercise of decentring the hegemonic epistemological framework of terror, as well as to suggest how this can be applied to the analysis of the particular plays chosen for this study.

3.1. The Epistemic Dislocation Afforded by Thinking Queerly about Terror

As indicated in the introduction, one of the aims of this thesis is to queer and distort the epistemological framework of terror privileged in studies on contemporary drama and terror to make room for other theatrical representations of this affect. Writing in the aftermath of 9/11, in a context where politicians in the West – particularly in the US and the UK – used politics of fear to produce a new kind of passive and uncritical model of citizenship who would accept and reproduce forms of national racism, Jill

³⁵ The term hijabi is used to refer to Muslim women who wear the hijab.

Dolan asks, “[w]hat can hope mean in a world of terror? What can performance *do*, politically, against these overwhelming odds?” (2005, p. 3; emphasis in original). Despite being formulated in a very particular context, and within the very same epistemological framework this thesis aims to queer, I want to suggest that these are still pertinent and pressing questions if we are to understand terror beyond this epistemological framework. By queering terror, this thesis expands Dolan’s questions to incorporate the following: what kind of lived experiences and embodiments of terror in the 21st century have been silenced and dismissed by the post-9/11 hegemonic narrative? With a view to distort terror, I have proposed to make the epistemological framework strange by approaching it through queer (dis)orientation, which not only allows for the distortion or dislocation of the normative framework, but also, and importantly for this study, for the appearance of otherwise obscured embodied forms of terror. In what follows, I succinctly explore what is to be gained from this exercise of queering.

One of the first advantages of looking at the normative narrative of terror through queerness is how the latter allows for the appearance of minoritarian subjects which are traditionally excluded from hegemonic frames of recognition. The plays chosen for the study are plays which, to borrow from Muñoz’s work on queer spectacles, “offer the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency” (1999, p. 1). As per Muñoz, minoritarian subjects are defined as those “whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny” (1999, p. 5), a list to which we need to add transphobia. This resonates with Jack Halberstam’s definition of queer methodology as “a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior” (2018, p. 13). Crucially, the presence of minoritarian subjects is intrinsically linked, for Muñoz, to his worldmaking project, in that, instances of worldmaking in the theatre “facilitate modes of minoritarian

belonging” (2009, p. 99). Attending to this, I suggest that by looking at terror through a queer lens, forms of terror that affect the racialized and gender non-conforming appear, thus providing the basis to identify and define racial and gender terror in *ear for eye* and *Burgerz*, which deal with systemic racism and transphobia respectively.

As seen in the previous chapters, both, scholars working on a non-hegemonic approach to terror, and those working on the intersections of queer theory and critical race have highlighted the importance of being attentive to contexts. Thus, Rustom Bharucha claims for the necessity to look at terror alongside the contexts in which it coexists, while both Fatima El-Tayeb and Cathy J. Cohen reclaims a context-bound understanding of queerness. Based on this, in the analysis of the plays, a section is devoted to the specific contexts in which they were written, which, in turn, are used in the task of providing a definition of the forms of terror (racial and gender) that can be observed in each text.

Finally, by queering the 21st century terror narrative, the temporal marker provided by 9/11 – to which I refer in the very first lines of this thesis – is questioned and potentially displaced. In her work *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir K. Puar sustains that one of the consequences of 9/11 was the emergence of the notion of political urgency, “a temporality that problematically resuscitates state of exception discourses” (2007, p. xvii). As seen in the first chapter, the connection between this sense of political urgency and the state of exception has been present across studies on theatre and terror.³⁶ Approaching terror as an embodied experience that is not necessarily linked to political urgency and the state of exception disrupts the temporality of the hegemonic epistemological framework. To further stress this point, in the analysis of the plays provided in Act Two, I will look at the particular treatment of time in the plays via theories of queer temporalities. This will be based on Castiglia and Reed’s work, and in particular their suggestion that memory and temporality are an

³⁶ In particular see Boll 2013 whose analysis is based on the figure of Agamben’s *homo sacer* and the state of exception. For a full appraisal on how the responses to 9/11 by Western governments reinstated the state of exception as a government paradigm see Agamben 2005.

explicit mode of queer worldmaking (2011, p. 22) – understood as “the creation of spaces in the present that do not necessarily allow for complete emancipation or even happiness but are suggestive of the potentiality for the future; they give hope” (A. Jones, 2013). Looking at how *ear for eye* and *Burgerz* disrupt normative and hegemonic temporalities will further allow the analysis to identify instances of worldmaking in the plays. Additionally, Muñoz stated that “often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic” (2009, p. 1), that is, worldmaking can not only be glimpsed through the disruption of temporalities, but also through the play’s aesthetics. Attending to this, the following chapters will also interrogate what kinds of worlds appear if we look at different aesthetic elements of the plays.

4. Act Two

Zong! #11

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– a crime

suppose the law a loss

suppose the law

suppose

Marlene NourbeSe Philip, *Zong! As Told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*

(2008)

Nomble Falope Bisuga Nuru Chimwala Sala

4.1. debbie tucker green's *ear for eye* (2018)

4.1.1. Situating *ear for eye*

ear for eye is a play written and directed by debbie tucker green – a Black British playwright, director and screenwriter – whose previous work includes *two women* (2000), *dirty butterfly* (2003), *born bad* (2003), *trade* (2004), *stoning mary* (2005), *generation* (2005), *random* (2008), *laws of war* (2010), *truth and reconciliation* (2011), *nut* (2013), *hang* (2015) and *a profoundly affectionate, passionate devotion to someone (-noun)* (2017). Her work has been performed at the Royal Court Theatre, the National Theatre, the Young Vic and the Soho Theatre – four major London venues for new writing – amongst others. *ear for eye* opened on the 25th of October 2018 at the Royal Court Theatre and was subsequently adapted for film by the playwright, who also directed it, with a premiere at the BFI London Film Festival on the 16th of October 2021. The film aired on the BBC Two on the same day and was subsequently made available on the BBC iPlayer.³⁷

The play – as well as the film – is an exploration of the consequences of racism against Black people, as a legacy of colonialism and as an example of the afterlives of enslavement, as much as it is a play about whiteness and the origins of white supremacy in the British Empire. Divided in three parts, Part One explores the nature of protest and the consequences of systemic violence against Black bodies. Through its twelve scenes, set both in the US and the UK, the play establishes a conversation with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, as well as with prior protests demanding an end to violence as well as a recognition of the livability of Black people. Part Two, which has been compared to David Mamet's 1992 two-hander *Oleanna* (Cavendish, 2018; Goddard, 2021a; Hitchins, 2018), centres on a conversation between a young African-

³⁷ tucker green slightly rewrote the play in order to be adapted into film, as a result, the order of some scenes in Part One was altered, and some lines were added. Throughout the discussion in this chapter, and whenever quotes from the text are shared, I will be making reference to the published play text. Quotes and references to the film which differ from those on the play will be duly specified. Lines added to quotes from the text between [] signal to lines added from the film.

American woman and a middle-aged white professor around the possible reasons to explain acts of mass violence. Departing from her usual style, as Goddard has noted (2021, p. 79), Part Three features two short films where a mix of Caucasian actors and non-actors recite verbatim extracts of both Jim Crow segregation laws and British (Jamaican) and French slave codes. This is followed by a very brief Epilogue featuring some of the characters in Part One.

Despite growing scholarship on the work of debbie tucker green, little attention has been given to *ear for eye* so far; with the exception of Nadine Holdsworth's inclusion of the play in a chapter which explores how recent Black British theatre has responded to national anxieties over immigration and multiculturalism (2020), a forthcoming article by Clare Finburgh Delijani briefly situating the play within a series of recent texts exploring the afterlives of enslavement (2022), and a short chapter where Lynette Goddard examines how *ear for eye* can be read as "a response to concerns about protest, the issues arising from the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and questions about the idea of racial progress" (Goddard, 2021a).³⁸ The response from theatre critics oscillated between those which focused on the play's anger and overwhelming cumulative impact (Billington, 2018; Hemming, 2018), those which only found connections with the systemic racism of the US, but curiously omitted that of the UK (Taylor, 2018), and

³⁸ For an overview of the most relevant scholarship on the work of debbie tucker green see: Abram, 2014; Aragay & Monforte, 2013; Escoda, 2017; Fragkou, 2010; Fragkou & Goddard, 2013; Goddard, 2013, 2021a; Holdsworth, 2014; Middeke, 2014; Monforte, 2015; Osborne, 2010; Reid, 2018 and Riedelsheimer & Stöckl, 2017. Most recently, Siân Adiseshiah and Jacqueline Bolton have edited the *debbie tucker green: Critical Perspectives* (2020), the first collection on the work of tucker green. together with an introduction and a chapter written by the editors, it features chapters by Elaine Aston, Harry Derbyshire and Loveday Hodson, Lynette Goddard, Sam Haddow, Maggie Inchley, Deirdre Osborne, Michael Pearce, David Ian Rabey, Izzy Rabey Trish Reid, Lea Sawyers, Lucy Tyler and myself.

Nadine Holdsworth chapter, called "The Beast That Lies Dormant in the Belly of Our Country: Race, Nation and Belonging" looks at *ear for eye* alongside Anders Lustgarten's *A Day at the Racists* (2010), Somalia Seaton's *Fall of the Kingdom, Rise of the Foot Soldier* (2016) and Testament's *Black Men Walking* (2018). Clare Finburgh's article, to be published in issue 65(4) of the journal *Modern Drama* examines how the presence of ghosts and haunting reveal the unfinished and active consequences of enslavement manifested in today's racial injustices. The text very briefly mentions debbie tucker green's *ear for eye* (2018) to further analyse Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights* (2020), Janice Okoh's *The Gift* (2020) and Selina Thompson's *salt* (2018).

I am grateful to Dr. Finburgh and Professor Lynette Goddard for generously sharing with me the early manuscripts of their work.

those written by critics who felt very attacked by what they witnessed on stage, referring to the playwright as “[angry] writer debbie tucker green” or a “sad bore who seeks to characterise Black British culture as a heroic fightback against an evil master race” (Evans, 2018) in a text that more than a review is a testimony of how systemic racism against Black people is also present in the cultural sector. In fact, Evans’s review, and his constant denial of the existence of contemporary forms of racism against Black people, is the clear example of why a play such as *ear for eye* is still essential. Prevalent through the reviews is a sense of discomfort. This appears as either a recognition of “the underlying existential discomfort of living in a society that’s essentially hostile towards you” (2008) as white critic Andrej Lukowski poses it and Claire Allfree also sustains (2018), or as a complaint by those who feel that the play in general, and its third part in particular, “serves as a bluntly accusatory finger-jab in the eye” (Cavendish, 2018) to the extent that, in his review, Dominic Cavendish defines the third part as “reductionist”, the play’s thesis as “tendentious” and accuses tucker green of using history “as an agit-prop whip to stoke a sense of incipient mutiny” (ibid.). In fact, reading through the play’s reviews, the general dismissal of the third part of the play as unnecessary, crude or blunt reveals the degree to which systemic racism remains unexamined by whiteness in general, and in the UK context in particular. The critics discomfort, thus, fluctuates between unaddressed white guilt and unacknowledged racism.

ear for eye is located in between a national and a transnational context that spans four hundred years of history. In a rare interview with Ellen E. Jones, tucker green stated that one of the things distinguishing this text from her previous plays was its “sheer staying power”, further explaining that contrary to her experience with previous plays, this time she could not move on after closing night. In her words, she said: “It’s like, ‘See you later!’ D’you know what I mean?” Not this time, though. “It’s just trying to be honest with yourself, like what is this thing that’s rattling around in here?” (Jones, 2021). This incapacity to be over with the play foregrounds the relevance and

prevalence of the themes it analyses and positions it against the immediacy of hashtag activism. The play opened before the resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement after the death of George Floyd – an African-American man murdered by the police in Minneapolis, to which I will return later – in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the film was released after it. Paraphrasing Jones and tucker green, this highlights the play/film as responses to the movement, and not to the moment, with tucker green further highlighting that “at times it feels like things are getting reduced. The energy around BLM at the moment is good, but the conversation has been there for 400 years...” (Jones, 2021). With this in mind, I want to suggest that both national and transnational contexts need to be taken into consideration for the analysis of the play, which this chapter approaches through the specific lens of racial terror in 21st century Britain. This follows from understanding that “the connections of Blackness [...] cannot be contained by national borders” (Andrews, 2018, p. xv).

In light of this, Michael Pearce’s book *Black British Drama: A Transnational History* (2017) offers a comprehensive analysis of Black British theatre which departs from a national paradigm. Within this, his analysis of tucker green’s work concentrating on *stoning mary* (2005), *generations* (2006) and *truth and reconciliation* (2011) –is framed within the notion of the African diaspora and “against the wider backdrop of what [Kim D.] Butler refers to as ‘race logic’ that connects ‘Africa and its descendants’” (Pearce, 2017, p. 190). Overall, Pearce acknowledges the influence that Jamaican poet Louise Bennett or African American women artists such as Ntozake Shange or Suzan-Lori Parks have had in tucker green’s work, and suggests that elements of African culture can be found in her work through the mediation of Black America and “the Afrocentric movement in African American art” (2017, p. 192). This complex web serves Pearce to read her work in relation to Africa and conclude that in the analysed plays, tucker green expresses “empathy with the challenges faced by many people living in African countries while not attempting to appropriate or belong to Africa” (2017, p. 203). However, while Pearce’s work on Black British playwrights and transnationalism

opens new directions of analysis that bridge national and international contexts, I have some misgivings with the overarching use of the terms Africa/African in his discussion of tucker green. The constant repetition of phrases such as “urgent African themes” (2017, p. 196) or “African world-view” (2017, p. 202) when discussing *stoning mary* and *generations*, together with overlooking the scenes set in Bosnia and Northern Ireland in *truth and reconciliation* – which he describes as “tokenistic” and suggests they are “used as an expansive device to highlight the wider, global context conflict and to disallow any easy racial ‘third world’ stereotyping” (2017, p. 200) – inadvertently contributes towards the reproduction of a monolithic and Eurocentric understanding of the African continent.

In this sense, reading her play *hang* (2015) within a transnational context that connects the themes of the play to African American artistic traditions that respond to racism with anger – such as the work of Amiri Baraka within the Black Arts Movement or the music of hip-hop artist Lauryn Hill, which debbie tucker green has credited within her influences – Pearce establishes a connection between the play and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, even if the play predates the spread of the movement to the UK. This allows Pearce to state that “[i]n so doing, tucker green ‘animates’ a *transatlantic* ‘black political collectivity’ that operates through US/UK networks of political identification and influence consolidated since the post-war period” (2017, p. 27). Be it through an analysis on how the use of rage connects tucker green’s *hang* to an African American artistic tradition, or through the foregrounding of the ‘African themes’ in her work, Pearce’s transnational approach to tucker green’s work opens avenues of research but overlooks the ways in which these connections are indebted to the legacies of the British Empire. In a review of Pearce’s work, Lynette Goddard’s suggests that

these issues become more complex when the history of slavery is acknowledged, which further troubles simple ideas about theatrical lineages and complicates Pearce’s conclusion that tucker green demonstrates the “ability to express

empathy with the challenges faced by many people living in African countries while not attempting to appropriate or belong to Africa. (2019, p. 203)

Goddard's critique further illuminates my misgivings and suggests a different approach within the transnational framework is needed, one that acknowledges how the history of enslavement has influenced in tucker green's plays.

With this in mind, my reading of *ear for eye* is based on the premise that the play underscores the collective experience of the afterlives of enslavement and the consequences of the racial terror installed by the British Empire. Following this, I approach tucker green's work as an example of Nandi Bhatia's understanding of theatre spaces as "sites of social and political activism that publicly interrogate the ongoing legacies of colonial histories" (2006, p. 5). In particular, this chapter explores tucker green's play through the lens of racial terror, understood as one such ongoing legacy of colonialism, and situates this analysis within the particular contexts of the 21st century, particularly in Britain, but to a lesser extent also in the US, given the focus of the play in both territories. In order to do that, the chapter looks at both, the play and the film, as part of a wider and possibly ongoing and unfinished project that, as mentioned earlier, wants to contribute towards the movement against systemic racism and racial terror. The analysis provided foregrounds both the play's theme and its aesthetics to suggest that while thematically the play focuses on racial terror in the US and the UK, as ultimate consequences of the British Empire, aesthetically debbie tucker green connects her play to a wider Afrodiasporic history and culture. To an extent, we could venture that the play asks the following two questions: what does to be Black in the West mean? And, where does the terror experienced by Black people in the West come from? In order to offer an answer, I will combine the reading of the play alongside its socio-political and historical contexts to map out how the play has engaged with racial terror, with a focus on its non-naturalistic aesthetic elements and how they are also used to foreground an anti-racist agenda. In order to do that, the chapter is organized as follows: firstly, I discuss the context in which the play and film were created to look

at how they contributed towards framing experiences of racial terror in the UK; secondly, the chapter offers a definition of what is understood as racial terror and what are its colonial legacies to further exemplify how this is presented in the play; thirdly, focusing on the dramatic shape of the play, as well as on the film's incorporation of the image of water, I trace the Afrodiasporic aesthetic elements of the play; and finally, I look at how the play's disruption of teleologic temporalities through its Afrodiasporic aesthetics contributes towards a project of Black worldmaking.

4.1.2. Contexts: Between a National and a Transnational Approach

4.1.2.1. Black Britain in the 21st Century

Part One of *ear for eye* opens with a mother and a son in a conversation on how he should move in public space as a Black man. This conversation will be repeated in different moments throughout this part, with different characters both from the US and the UK, and it chronicles how Black youth should respond and behave when they are stopped by police officers. Both reviewers and scholars have linked the impulse behind these scenes in particular, and Part One in general, to the global #BlackLivesMatter movement resulting mostly from police brutality in the US (Goddard, 2021a; Holdsworth, 2020; Lukowski, 2018). As Nadine Holdsworth claims, “the spectre of black men who have lost their lives in the United States at the hands of the police, which has propelled widespread protests, outrage and the foundation of #BlackLivesMatter, haunts this and other scenes” (Holdsworth, 2020, p. 189). This is echoed in Lynette Goddard's own work on the play where they briefly chronicle how the antiracist movement spread to the UK with demonstrations taking place on the fifth anniversary of the shooting of Mark Duggan (Goddard, 2021a, p. 80).³⁹ Despite

³⁹ Mark Duggan, a twenty-nine-year-old black British man, was shot dead by the police in Tottenham, London, in August 2011. Protests following his death erupted in several areas in London, including Barking, Battersea, Brixton, Croydon, Ealing, East Ham, Enfield, Hackney, Lewisham, Peckham, Tottenham, Walthamstow, Wandsworth and Woolwich. These came to be known as the 2011 London riots. For an appraisal of how this has been examined in British theatre see “#BlackLivesMatter: Remembering Mark Duggan and David Oluwale in Contemporary British Plays” (Goddard, 2018).

the overarching influence of the global #BlackLivesMatter movement, and attending to the British context, I want to suggest that this, as well as subsequent scenes in the play that address the relationship between police forces and Black people, should also be read in relation to the UK's Metropolitan's police 'Stop and Search' tactic. Scene Eleven – which chronicles the violent arrest of a Black British man – recalls the case of George Mpanga, known as George the Poet, who was stopped and searched in 2018, and forced to strip, after returning from a spoken word gig (Goddard, 2021a p. 83; Holdsworth, 2020, p. 190). Implemented in 1981, Stop and Search is precluded by former 'sus laws' (short for 'suspected person') from the Victorian era – especially section 8 of the Vagrancy Act of 1892 – which gave police officers the power to search anyone who was being disorderly or suspected to be a “rogue and vagabond” (Nickolls & Allen, 2022, p. 42). While the antecedent can be traced back to the 1800s, contemporary stop and search tactics find their origins in the aftermath of the 1981 Brixton Uprising, when sus laws were replaced by the current legislation, which introduced a power to stop and search people with “reasonable grounds” (Nickolls & Allen, 2022, p. 9).⁴⁰ Despite the fact that the Macpherson Report concluded that the Metropolitan Police was institutionally racist, and the ethnic disparity in stop and search demonstrated racist stereotyping, the tactic is still in use.⁴¹ As a matter of fact, the

⁴⁰ The Brixton Uprising, also known as the Brixton riots, were a series of clashes between Black youth and the Metropolitan police in the streets of Brixton between the 10th and the 12th of April 1981. As Alex Wheatle explains, around fifty per cent of Black young men living in Brixton in the early eighties were both unemployed and targeted by the police through the use of the stop and search tactic (BBC, 2019). The spark of the uprising was the institutional disregard for the loss of the lives of thirteen Black youth in the New Cross Fire and the conflicts with the police during the Black People's Day of Action, the first organised mass protest by black British citizens, which saw twenty thousand people take to the streets under the slogan “13 Dead, Nothing Said” (Ware, 2021). Uprisings took place in other British cities including Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester. In 2021, marking the forty-year anniversary of the riots, filmmaker Steve McQueen directed *Uprising* a three-part series for the BBC documenting the leading up to the Brixton Uprising.

⁴¹ Set up in March 1998 to investigate the murder of Stephen Lawrence – killed by a group of white youths on the 22nd of April 1992 who had the charges against them dropped – the Macpherson Inquiry, and the subsequently published Macpherson Report, concluded that the investigation of the murder was “marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers” (Macpherson, 1999, p. 365). Together with listing a series of recommendations to reduce the impact of racism, as noted by Aragay and Monforte, the report “introduced ‘a significant new codification of racism’ by identifying and naming ‘institutional

number of stop and searches increased during the first decade of the 2000s, reaching 1.5 million in 2009 (Nickolls & Allen, 2022, p. 5). The very same week *ear for eye* opened, the Home Secretary at the time, Sajid Javid, announced his plans to step up its use (Billington, 2018), which, considering its proved racist bias, can be read as an elongation of Theresa May's 'Hostile Environment' policies.⁴²

Introduced in 2012 by the then Conservative Home Secretary Theresa May, the Hostile Environment policies were devised to persecute and ultimately force the 'voluntary leave' of people in the UK without appropriate leave to remain, or permanent residence, with the aim of harshly reducing immigration figures.⁴³ As put by May, the aim of the policies was "to create a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants" (as cited in Goodfellow, 2019, p. 2) further stating that "[w]hat we don't want [...] is a situation where people think they can come here and overstay because they can access everything they need" (as cited in El-Enany, 2020, p. 1); this resulted in the introduction of immigration checks in every aspect of people's lives – including housing or visits to the National Health Service – effectively transforming doctors, nurses or landlords into border guards. As Maya Goodfellow observes,

[r]egardless of how removed their profession was from the world of immigration policy, the threat of being fined or sentenced to jail time loomed

racism' 'for the first time within public legislative discourse', where it had 'never before been acknowledged by government or by official inquiry'" (2013, p. 97). In the wake of the Macpherson Report, the Arts Council published *Eclipse: Developing Strategies to Combat Racism in the Theatre* a report which identified institutional racism "within all levels of theatre production in Britain" (Aragay & Monforte, 2013, p. 99). Its name, Eclipse, can be traced back to the Eclipse Conference, held in 2001, with the aim of combating said institutional racism within the theatre world. In 2003, a Black-led theatre company with the same name was formed in Sheffield, with the aim of touring Black theatre to regional cities (Pearce, 2021, p. 329).

⁴² As recorded in Nickolls and Allen, former Home Secretary and also former Prime Minister Theresa May requested an inquiry to look at how the forces were using the tactic. The resulting publication of the report "Stop and Search Powers: Are the Police Using them Effectively and Fairly?" found "worrying levels on non-compliance with the requirement to have "reasonable grounds" to conduct searches" (2022, p. 43)

⁴³ Indefinite leave to remain, or settled status, grants non-full British citizens the right to live, work and study in the UK indefinitely and can be used to apply for British citizenship. People with indefinite leave to remain can also apply for public benefits if they are eligible. (*Check if You Can Get Indefinite Leave to Remain*, 2021)

over them if they failed to carry out checks to ensure people they encountered through their work were in the country legally. (2019, pp. 2–3)

Without being able to prove their status, migrants without the right documentation lost their access to housing, healthcare or bank accounts and could even face deportation.

The use of the term ‘hostile’ is not coincidental. Speaking at an interview to Granada Television’s *World in Action* in 1978 while being the Leader of the Opposition, Margaret Thatcher shared her views on the issue of immigration. In her famous intervention, Thatcher said

people are rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in. (as cited in Olusoga, 2016, p. 515)

Together with the word hostile, which later became Theresa May’s flagship during her time in the Home Office, Thatcher’s ‘swamp’ also had consequences for Black British people. One year later, she used the term again in a newspaper interview when she said “some people have felt swamped by immigrants. They’ve seen the whole character of their neighbourhoods change” (as cited in Olusoga, 2016). The term, which brings images of infestation, was reminiscent of Enoch Powell’s rhetoric and was used to name a police operation in 1981 – Swamp 81 –after twenty thousand Black people marched to central London to protest the administration’s response to the New Cross Fire. Under Swamp 81, almost one thousand Black people were stopped and searched. As Olusoga emphasizes: “[t]his heavy-handed operation came on top of a series of incidents that had gradually ratcheted up tensions between young Black people and the police, resulting in a complete breakdown of trust, and explosion of anger and a wave of destruction” (Olusoga, 2016, p. 516). The most immediate reaction to this were the Brixton Uprisings (see footnote 9).

One of the most inhumane consequences of the Hostile Environment policies is what is known as the Windrush scandal, which broke to the public in April 2018.⁴⁴ As a result of May's migration policies, British citizens who had been born in Commonwealth countries and resided in Britain since their childhood were being classified as illegal immigrants by the Home Office, a situation that mostly affected people born in the West Indies. As a result, citizens who arrived from the Caribbean in the 1960s were required to provide documentation of their continued residency in the country to be granted the legal right to stay in the place where they had built their lives. This was coupled with the Home Office's carelessness with their own documentation pertaining to the Windrush generation. It was later revealed that the Home Office had destroyed thousands of landing card slips which recorded the arrival date in the UK of Windrush migrants and were proof of the wrongful persecution of those affected by the scandal (Gentleman, 2018). Together with unveiling a case of systemic racism, this also proved the importance of the archive after witnessing the carelessness with which the UK Government treated the landing slips of the early generation of West-Indian migrants, without which it was almost impossible to prove their legal status.

As recent publications highlight, and as seen by the aforementioned intervention by Margaret Thatcher in 1978, hostilities towards migrant and racialized populations predate May's Hostile Environment (Andrews, 2021; El-Enany, 2020; Gentleman, 2019). In "The Unwanted: The Secret Windrush Files", a documentary released by BBC Two in January 2019, historian David Olusoga demonstrates how May's Hostile Environment was seventy years in the making. Foregrounding once again the importance of the archive and going back to the arrival of the first West Indian migrants, Olusoga reveals the lengths to which politicians went in order to create a hostile environment for Black British citizens, exposing how they have had to fight to

⁴⁴ As stated by Amelia Gentleman, the term 'Windrush Generation' refers not only to the passengers of the Empire Windrush, who arrived at Essex on 22 June 1948, but it also includes subsequent waves of migration from the West Indies who landed in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s, mostly as children (2019, p. 9). It is precisely those who arrived in these later waves that have been mostly affected by the Windrush scandal.

be considered as British. On that note, the constant referral to members of the Windrush generation as migrants – even though they were British citizens and/or Commonwealth citizens at the time of their arrival – marks them forever as aliens, and as such, always suspicious of not belonging, as by definition, migrants do not belong to the country in which they reside. This proves, as Ian Sanjay Patel observes, that in the British context, “[i]mmigration is also a byword for race” (2021, p. 2). Ultimately, what this shows is that the word immigrant sticks, to use Ahmed’s concept (2004, p. 16), to all those racialized bodies who are perceived as aliens, leading, as will be seen, to the emergence of internal borders. In the words of El-Enany, “as the hostile environment policy demonstrates, racialised people also experience internal borders which are invisible and permeable for most white people” who, in general, cross borders and move through white hegemonic spaces with ease (2020, p. 25). What this suggests is that, through racializing processes, borders stick to people so that racialised people “take with them the space of the border, a space of disproportionate vulnerability to violence and premature death” (2020, p. 26).⁴⁵

The intensification of Britain’s border regime, built on the aforementioned hostility towards their racialized population and intensified by the dehumanising language used to speak about the 2015 refugee crisis (Cowan, 2021, p. 56), ultimately led to the 2016 EU referendum (Brexit), one of the consequences of which was an increase in the rhetoric on border anxiety and the scapegoating of immigrants and all those perceived as such by the Leave campaign. In the conclusions to his aforementioned discussed book, Michael Pearce offers a brief consideration of what the future holds for Black British drama in the aftermath of Brexit. Speculating from the past, Pearce draws on Stuart Hall’s eerie predictions where he stated that “when the era of nation-states in globalization begins to decline, one can see a regression to a very defensive and highly dangerous form of national identity which is driven by a very aggressive form of racism” (as cited in Pearce, 2017, p. 214). Writing on the aftermath

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the border as a sticky concept, and an application of this idea to contemporary British theatre see Massana, 2020c.

of the referendum, Pearce further sustains that “black people continue to be vulnerable to being labelled as outsiders and subjected to acts of terror as visible minorities in a majority-white country” (2021, p. 335). With this quote in mind, and considering how racial hate crimes have increased since the Brexit referendum (ibid.) we can attest that the resurgence of nationalism derived from Brexit has indeed been accompanied by racism and xenophobia directed towards the racialized population.

4.1.2.2. The Pan-African Colours: Black is a Country

Both, the play and the film posters feature the red, black and green colours that, since 1920, conform the Pan-African flag created by the members of Marcus Garvey’s led Black nationalist organization UNIA-ACL (Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League).⁴⁶ The recurrent use of the Pan-African colours in both parts of the project, together with an interrogation on the nature of Black protest throughout Part One of the play, signal to the necessity of exploring in what ways the play engages in a conversation with the histories of Black radicalism. This is not to suggest that Debbie Tucker Green is making the case for Pan-Africanism, but rather, that she is evoking the histories of Black struggle contained in the colours of the flag. In this sense, I want to suggest that this conversation manifests especially in the scenes where younger and older characters discuss the viable forms of protest for movements of Black emancipation. At the same time, Black radicalism also envelops the play in its overarching and consistent critique of European colonialism.

Originating in the mid-19th century in the US, and rooted in a series of conferences and congresses that took place in London in 1900, Pan-Africanism is

⁴⁶ According to UNIA-ACL, the colours of the flag represent the following: red stands for the blood that unites all people of African descent, shed both through histories of enslavement and struggles of liberation; black represents the black nation that the existence of the flag affirms; green refers to natural wealth and resources in Africa. For more information on the history and significance of the flag see:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180827122232/http://theunia-acl.com/index.php/history-red-black-green>

generally defined as “the idea that peoples of African descent have common interests and should be unified” (Kuryla, 2022). The history of Pan-African intellectuals, however, shows that this orthodox definition can and should be questioned, as it contributes, once more, towards providing a unified understanding of both Africa, and how the relationship with Africa is understood in the diversity of Black politics movements and traditions. Tracing the origins of the movement, Kehinde Andrews states:

Britain as the location of the birthplace of the organized Pan-Africanism is not a coincidence. Not only was the congress held in Britain, the seat of imperial power, it actually took place in the Palace of Westminster. This is not mere symbolism, but testament to the fact that the movement’s origins were not in direct conflict with the colonial administration. (Andrews, 2018, p. 41)

As Andrews shows, the origins of Pan-Africanism as an organized movement were not built on the legacies of Black struggle, revolts of enslaved populations or anti-imperialist movements, but within the very same imperial framework. Yet, parallel to the Pan-African conferences, Marcus Garvey’s UNIA-ACL emerged as a more radical alternative which claimed that Africa should be for the Africans. Garvey’s proposal, however, was not framed within the auspices of colonial powers but wished to radically depart from them.

It was within the context of Garvey’s struggle that the flag that gives colour to Tucker Green’s play was created, establishing a long link between the three colours and Black struggle.⁴⁷ This connection is highlighted in the film by including the flag colours in an animated sequence that is featured in Part One Scene Nine from the play, which in the film’s rearranged order appears in place of Scene Eleven.⁴⁸ In particular, the flag

⁴⁷ On this, Kehinde Andrews notes how Garvey’s politics were not only influential amongst Black radicals in the African diaspora, but also in the African continent, “with the red, black and green that appears in flags across the continent being a testament to this” (Andrews, 2018, p. 55).

⁴⁸ The brief animated sequence was created in collaboration with the international design studio Glassworks Creative Studio and directed by Hugo Rodríguez Rodríguez. As explained in the studio’s website, the animation sequence reproduces a black and white sketch-like appearance to convey the character’s thoughts on paper, with rapid moves and twists that aim to reproduce Tucker

YOUNG ADULT Sir I –
ADULT and fuck your disrespectful respect.
Beat.
Scuse my fuckin language.

(tucker green, 2018, p. 32)

The connection with the genealogy of Black struggle is further stressed in the film where, while this scene is being played, historic images of Black protest are juxtaposed with the words of Adult. Together with the aforementioned Pan-African flag, the film also features pictures of Professor and activist Angela Davis during a speech in Northern California in 1981, a Black Panther protest demanding the liberation of the party's founder Huey P. Newton, a picture of Fred Hampton, the party's deputy chairman, at a rally in Chicago's Grant Park in September 1969, three months before his assassination, and an image of Malcolm X during the 1960 Harlem Freedom Rally.⁴⁹

The images of members of the Black Panthers alongside that of Malcolm X and Davis recall the historical criminalization of Black protest, when fighters for Black emancipation were accused of being terrorists. At the same time, they signal towards tucker green's wish to acknowledge, and privilege, the specific genealogy of Black radicalism, understood by Andrews as the radical tradition of Black politics, which he contraposes to the liberal tradition represented by figures such as Martin Luther King. According to Andrews, King, as well as the Civil Rights movement more generally, represent a liberal tradition which "acknowledge[s] the problems of racial inequality but put[s] them down to lack of access to the system" (2018, p. xvi); this tradition, therefore, is based on the reclamation of equal access to the existing socio-political and economic system.

In contraposition to this, Andrews sketches the radical tradition of Black politics, represented by Malcolm X, the Black Panthers and Angela Davis amongst

⁴⁹ Neither the context nor the origin of the images are provided in the film. This lack of information aligns with tucker green's usual dramatic style, where different layers of interpretation and access are possible depending on the audience's knowledge and/or their will to do the necessary exercise of de-coding.

others. In this tradition, the problem *is* the system, with that, Andrews tells us that “Black radicalism therefore calls for an overturning of the system that oppresses Black people, and for nothing short of a revolution” (2018, p. xvii); he further clarifies that “[r]adicalism is based on rejecting the fundamental principles that govern society and creating a new paradigm” (2018, p. xviii). If we relate this latest quote to the play, we might be tempted to impose this wish to create a new paradigm onto tucker green’s text. Lack of access to the playwright prevents us from ascribing these views to her; as *ear for eye*, as I will further develop in the discussion on the play’s form, tucker green does not offer a version of this new paradigm, but rather, her work emphatically underscores the entrapment of Black lives within the current oppressing system.

A common misconception regarding Black radicalism is the alignment of this tradition with violence, a fallacy constructed on the false premise that the main difference between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King was their views on the use of violence (Andrews, 2018, p. xx). In the scenes between Adult and Young Adult, the discussion on how to protest features many exchanges where violence is central, featuring a line that is repeated by Young Adult throughout: “Gimme a reason to not” (tucker green, 2018, pp. 21, 23, 28, 51, 135), to which Adult produces a series of reasons including: “(It) won’t make you feel better” (2018, p. 21); “You ain’t unique [...] You ain’t original” (2018, p. 24), alluding to the fact that Young Adult is not the first Black person to have these feelings; “it’s not an example that should –” (2018, p. 28), stressing that he should not provide this example to younger generations. Tempting as it would be to ascribe these views on the use of violence to the fallacious distinction between the radical and liberal traditions, this needs to be complicated, and it factually is, by the aforementioned juxtaposition in the film of the images of Black radicals to the words of Adult – namely the character who seems to stress an approach which refuses the use of violence. Based on this, I want to suggest that what the play explores is precisely the contradictions within Black radicalism itself, as well as the nature of what constitutes violence, especially if we look at the many examples the text

provides on how the systemic violence against Black lives constitutes a form of racial terror. This aspect will be further analysed in the next section of this chapter, however, the connections between systemic violence and Black radicalism can be sketched here better if we go back to Andrews. In relation to this he tells us:

the system of oppression is unlikely to give up its power without suppressing the struggle through violence. Black radicalism promotes violence only for self-defence and liberation, and recognises that the liberal forces of oppression are defined by violence. The hypocrisy of defining “political violence” as the possession of the radicals, or the extremists, is truly frightening. Liberalism, upon which the West is built, is the most violent system that has ever existed on the planet. The West is founded on the genocide of 80% of the native people in the Americas. Once they had exhausted the native population they then brutally enslaved Africans for three centuries, murdering tens of millions of people. (2018, p. xxi)

As we see in Andrews’s quote, construing Black radicalism as violent is a strategy that serves the purpose of deflecting the attention from the inherent relationship between Western liberalism – a system founded thanks to Colonial exploitation – and systemic violence against racialized bodies. In the play, Tucker Green draws attention to this in Part Three. Amongst the fragments from the French and Jamaican slave codes we can read excerpts such as: “That any Negro or slave shall fraudulently have in their possession, unknown to his or her master, owner or overseer, any fresh beef, veal, mutton or goat [...] such Negro or other slave shall be whipped in such manner as magistrates shall direct” (2018, p. 129). The acts that can lead to whipping include also selling sugar cane (2018, p. 129), being at a distance of eight miles from the house or plantation (2018, p. 130), or offend a Christian (2018, p. 133). The violence exerted over the enslaved population as presented in these codes is not only relegated to whipping, but includes more severe punishments, including death, such as the following:

The fugitive slave who has been on the run for one month from the day his master reported him to the police, shall have his ears cut off and shall be branded... on one shoulder. If he commits the same infraction for another month, again counting from the day he is reported, he shall have his hamstring cut and be branded... on the other shoulder. The third time he shall be put to death. (2018, pp. 131-132)

The sheer brutality of these punishments underscores the systemic violence that needs to be contraposed to the violent action that Young Adult is referring to, a view accentuated by the Epilogue of the play, where several characters from Part One resume the line “Give me one reason to not” (2018, p. 135), making these the very final words of the play.

If we go back once again to Black radicalism, Andrews reminds us that, for Malcolm X,

it was a fantasy to pretend that you can overthrow the murderous beast of the West without engaging in violence [... his] most famous quote is “by any means necessary”, but this actually distorts the importance of his legacy. Radicalism is not about the means (violence/non-violence) but the ends (reform/revolution). (2018, p. xxi-xxii)

In the play, this concern is mostly voiced by Young Adult. In Scene Nine he stresses the necessity of responding to systemic violence with the same means when he says: “It’s fire with fire” (2018, p. 61). Similarly, he refutes the liberal approach in Scene Twelve when he answers to Adult’s objections with

Back-a-the-crowd.

Back-a-the-bus.

Back-a-the-line.

Polite.

Liked.

That where you was?

Again. (2018, p. 76).

His reference to the “Back-a-the-bus”, a line that is also repeated by Friend 2 in scene Five (2018, p. 40) signals to the Jim Crow Laws, the laws of segregation in place in the United States between 1877 and the 1960s, and which are referred to in Part Three of the play. Amongst the Jim Crow Laws, the segregation of buses in Montgomery, Alabama – where Black citizens were forced by law to ride in the back of the bus – is the most easily identifiable, as the refusal to keep subscribing this law by Rosa Parks led to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the first mass demonstration of the Civil Rights Movement.

The play’s interrogation of forms of Black protest is elongated in the film, where a more straightforward connection with the #BlackLivesMatter movement is established. At the heart of this international movement there’s a claim for recognition and livability, a concept to which I will return later in the chapter. As Angela Davis has stated:

The seemingly simple phrase “Black Lives Matter” has disrupted undisputed assumptions about the logic of equality, justice, and human freedom in the United States and all over the world. It has encouraged us to question the capacity of logic—Western logic—to undo the forces of history, especially the history of colonialism and slavery. (Davis in Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2017, p. xiii)

This simple phrase, as Davis puts it, was first used in a Facebook post by Alicia Garza, one of the women responsible, together with Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Opal Tometi, of spearheading the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Written as a response of the acquittal of George Zimmerman after killing the Black teenager Trayvon Martin, Garza shared the following message on social media: “btw stop saying that we are not surprised. that’s a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. stop giving up on black life. black people, I will

NEVER give up on us. NEVER.” (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2017 p. 45).⁵⁰ Khan-Cullors’s response to the post with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter marked the beginning of a US national (and later international) network, antiracist campaign and protest movement that became internationally renowned especially after the killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin. The moment was captured in video by a close-by witness, ensuring that there was a testimony to the inhuman killing of Floyd, who repeatedly stated that he could not breathe, while the officer pressed his knee to Floyd’s neck for over nine minutes. Two crucial elements of the #BlackLivesMatter response to systemic violence against Black people are also present in George Floyd’s murder. The first one is the repetition, by Floyd, of the words “I can’t breathe” (as cited in Samuels & Olorunnipa, 2022, p. 224), which were also the last words of Eric Garner and which have become one of the messages chanted in #BlackLivesMatter protests.⁵¹

The second crucial element, and one featured in the play, is the use of personal phones to record and therefore witness, moments of racial violence. The importance of witnessing as a form of political activism is captured by Lynette Goddard’s work on the play when they write:

When I was a teenager, I was taught that when I see a Black person being apprehended by the police that I should stop and watch as a form of personal activism, that I should actively stare to let the police see that I am watching and witnessing. It is believed that such witnessing can potentially make an impression, affecting the actions of the police if they know that they are being watched, and in some small way protect the person who is being questioned. In

⁵⁰ 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by George Zimmerman in Stanford, Florida on February 26, 2012. Although Zimmerman was charged with murder, he was later acquitted after he claimed self-defence. At the time of the shooting, Martin, dressed in a hoodie, was coming back from a convenience store. His killing heightened the debate over racial profiling in the US.

⁵¹ Eric Garner was killed by police on Staten Island in 2014. In a video recording the moment of his death he can be heard repeating the phrase ‘I can’t breathe’ eleven times while put into a chokehold by police officer Daniel Pantaleo. The same final words were uttered by Javier Ambler II, Manuel Ellis and George Floyd, all killed by police brutality.

technological times, such witnessing includes recording with videos uploaded and going viral on social media platforms.” (Goddard, 2021a)

In the play, this is referred to in multiple occasions throughout Part One. In Scene Three, a Black British woman describes how she was detained by four police officers during a protest because she “fits the description of” (tucker green, 2018, p. 17), she shares how her detention was filmed: “some a-the young ones started filming – phones out like a hi-tech self-defence” (ibid.). Scene Five echoes this moment when, during a conversation between two Black British women who have participated in a protest, Friend 1 says: “You watch what I risked while I stood there and stood there and stood there witnessin’ and recording the Sista shoutin from across the way with a four-a-them and the one-a-her –” (2018, p. 37). Despite the fact that tucker green does not indicate that the scenes are related, the fact that they both are located in the UK, together with Friend 1’s reference to “a four-a-them and the one-a-her” can lead us to conclude that what Friend 1 from Scene Five recorded was the arrest of the woman in Scene Three.

The film, which opened after the killing of Floyd, establishes a more direct conversation with the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Part One starts with a scene where a group of Black people are filmed from above, standing on a pool of water, while the sounds to the song “Ooh La La” by hip-hop duo Run the Jewels, featuring Greg Nice & DJ Premier, is playing. The relationship between the hip-hop duo and the #BlackLivesMatter movement is longstanding, starting when the duo played in St. Louis (Missouri) hours after the announcement that the police officer Darren Wilson would not face charges for shooting Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, in Ferguson (Petridis, 2020). Besides, their fourth studio album, where “Oh La La” is featured, includes references to the death of Eric Garner in 2014. The album was released on the wake of the killing of George Floyd, which reignited the #BlackLivesMatter movement both in the US and the UK. The inclusion of “Ooh La La” in tucker green’s film establishes another connection, with the multiple histories of Black struggle and simultaneously, although perhaps flimsily, with the horizon of a

utopian future where struggles emerging from unequal systems of oppression are over.⁵² Later in the film, at the end of Part One, Scene Four, the song “Hublot Handgun” by US rapper Vlad Moneybags is played. The song, released on July 2020, features a sample of the base from Run the Jewels’s “Ooh La La”. Despite thorough research, I have not been able to track any further connection between both artists, nor any other information on Vlad Moneybags. This notwithstanding, the song’s release three months after the killing of George Floyd, as well as its explicit lyrics on the violence faced by Black bodies, point towards a connection between the song, the struggle for Black emancipation and the need to put an end to racial violence.⁵³ Furthermore, several images of the US and UK #BlackLivesMatter protests after the killing of George Floyd are shown in the film juxtaposed with the scenes in Part One. Videos played before Scene five include protests in front of the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square (London), as well as images of people dancing during the protests, juxtaposed to images of Friend 2 also dancing while wearing a black beret reminiscent of the outfits worn by the Black Panthers.

One final connection that can be established between the play / film and the #BlackLivesMatter movement revolves around the importance of naming. Together with ‘Black Lives Matter’ and ‘I can’t breathe’, another slogan chanted during protests as well as shared in the form of hashtags in social media is ‘Say his name’ / ‘Say her name’, a phrase that establishes the importance of remembering and repeating the names of those killed by police brutality both as a form of witnessing, remembering and archiving their deaths, and as a way to prevent official history and official narratives to erase them from public memory. Following her usual aesthetic choice, tucker green does not give any names to their characters – who are referred generically as Woman, Mother, Son, Adult, etc. However, the historical importance of naming is referred to in the play in Part One, Scene Four, when the character of Young Adult says: “... And if

⁵² The video to “Ooh La La” was released on the 27th of April 2020; it can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sff7Kc77QAY>

⁵³ The song can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIfnzK4ztDY>

it ain't in his name there's a fuckin list centuries long of names I could. Would. Will. Do it in. If you ain't gonna give me no good reason to not" (tucker green, 2018, p. 30). This replica, which comes in the middle of the discussion on the nature of protest that punctuates Part One between Adult and Young Adult, encapsulates a longstanding tradition of naming as a form of Black protest and Black archiving contained in the phrase "a fuckin list centuries long of names". A connection can be established here between this 'list' and Marlene NourbeSe Philip's monumental poetry collection *Zong!* (2008). Based on the legal case *Gregson v. Gilbert*, and using only words from the sole public document related to the slave ship massacre, NourbeSe Philip captures the horror, terror and incomprehension derived from the slaughter of enslaved people for the benefit of the captain's financial gain.⁵⁴ Together with using the words of the legal text to create a poetry collection that unlocked the silenced histories of the massacred enslaved people, and visually reproduced the mutilation of their bodies, NourbeSe Philip wishes to reclaim their names too. After thorough research, she concludes that despite recording their financial value, no names are listed in the documents pertaining to the enslaved population of the *Zong* (2008, p. 194). This notwithstanding, the poet's wish to repair the dehumanisation of the ship's enslaved population leads her to naming those lost to the massacre, albeit with names from the Yoruba tradition that may or may not coincide with the real names of those who lost their lives. Thus, the first section of the poetry collection, "Os", features a footnote in every page with the invented names of the deceased – Masuz, Zuwena, Ogunsheye Ziyad, Ogwambi, etc. – until the footnotes become blank on page 49, drawing attention to their being silenced

⁵⁴ *Gregson v. Gilbert* refers to the legal case disputing insurance claims related to the slave ship *Zong*. After months of travel – delayed due to multiple navigational errors – part of the enslaved population of the ship had perished due to illness, malnutrition and lack of water. Fearing for his future insurance claim, the ship's captain, Mr. Luke Collingwood, decided to throw overboard, and effectively massacre, an additional one hundred and fifty enslaved men and women to simulate a mutiny. Under insurance law, this would guarantee his financial claim, thus showing that "the massacre of the African slaves would prove to be more financially advantageous to the owners of the ship than if the slaves were allowed to die of 'natural causes'." (NourbeSe Philip, 2008, p. 189). Also known as the *Zong Case*, *Gregson v. Gilbert* became a fundamental piece in the campaigns for the abolition of slavery, to the point where *Black Ivory's* author, James Walwin sustained that "the line of dissent from the *Zong* case to the successful campaign for abolition of slavery was direct and unbroken, however protracted and uneven" (as cited in NourbeSe Philip, 2008, p. 189)

and erased from history. With all this in mind, and returning to *ear for eye*, if we understand the list of names referred by Young Adult as going all the way back to the names from *Zong!*, and stretching to the future, we can see how the play contains within it the whole history of Black protest, as well as the whole history of forms of racial terror and silencing of Black experience.

Bearing on that, it is important to note that Calvin L. Warren has established a correlation between the phrase #BlackLivesMatter and ontological terror. In particular, Warren observes that the phrase “carries a certain terror in its dissemination” and “it *compels* us to face the terrifying question [...] can blacks have life? What would such life *mean* in an antiblack world” (2018, p. 1; emphasis in original). Submerging himself into the question, Warren nihilistically suggests that “there [is] no solution to the problem of antiblackness; it will continue without end, as long as the world exists” (2018, p. 3). The despair in this affirmation encapsulates a view of the world not far from that of Black radicalism, and therefore, as I want to suggest, from the play: Black lives can only exist if the world/system is wholeheartedly changed. Ultimately Warren concludes that urging these ontological questions produces terror: “the terror that ontological security is gone, the terror that ethical claims no longer have an anchor, and the terror of inhabiting an existence outside the precincts of humanity and its humanism” (2018, p. 4). With this in mind, the following section outlines how racial terror manifests, especially in contemporary Britain, and how it is explored in the play.

4.1.3. Racial Terror

In her detailed investigation on how the Windrush scandal was uncovered, Amelia Gentleman chronicles the case of Paulette Wilson, whose activism was at the forefront of the fight for the rights of those directly affected by it.⁵⁵ Reliving the moment Wilson

⁵⁵ Paulette Wilson became one of the leading voices in the fight to reverse the consequences that the Hostile Environment had for members of the Windrush Generation. Born in Jamaica in 1965, she arrived in Britain as a ten-year-old. After a lifetime in the UK, she was notified by the Home Office that she was liable for removal as she could not provide evidence of lawful entry in the country. Wilson was arrested, detained, and later sent to London Heathrow airport’s deportation

was informed of her imminent removal, Gentleman writes: “[f]or a moment Paulette, who had worked in the House of Commons canteen, was quiet, dazed by her own terror” (2019, p. 5). Similarly, in Gentleman’s investigation we learn about the experience of a man named Jeffrey – no surname is provided – who was also signalled as an illegal immigrant and decided to hide as much as possible from the Home Office. Writing about his story, Gentleman says:

Then he began to describe the level of his fear. For several years he had been avoiding walking down the nearby high street because he was frightened of the Immigration Enforcement teams who frequently waited there. “You see immigration vans – they are often parked up the backstreets here, and you think they might be after you. It is always at the back of your mind. You feel very uneasy. I’ve heard about people who’ve been put straight on a plane.” It was affecting how he slept. If a car pulled up outside the house at night, he would get up to peer out of the window to see if it was a Border Force van coming to pick him up. He was worried about what it would be like to be deported. He was not planning to claim a pension for fear of being identified as an illegal immigrant. He had deliberately stopped having any interaction with official bodies. “You avoid confrontation, like the plague, in case the Bill get involved.”

He had been living in hiding for years. (Gentleman, 2019, p. 71)

Closely reading Jeffrey’s experience, we can witness the ways in which fear of deportation affected his everyday life, to the point where he was willing to renounce his rights – like the claiming of a pension – so as not to draw attention to himself in front of the authorities. Jeffrey’s lived experience provides a first-hand account of the consequences of forms of racial terror.

centre. Her removal was stopped with the aid of the Refugee and Migrant centre of Wolverhampton and the constituency’s MP Emma Reynolds, granting Wilson more time to gather evidence of her lawful residency. In 2018 she was granted leave to remain, and she decided to go public with her story and campaign for migrant rights to help others facing a similar situation. She passed away in July 2020. For a detailed chronicle of her case, see the chapter “A person with no leave to remain” in Gentleman, 2019.

Jeffrey's case was, unfortunately, one amongst many. Writing about the consequences of May's Hostile Environment and their relationship to the Windrush scandal, Gentleman also shares the case of Sylvester Marshall, who was required to pay £54,000 for a course of radiotherapy to treat his cancer, as he could not produce a valid British passport that could prove his right to remain in the country. The NHS's requirement of his settled status responded to new measures introduced by Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt under the NHS Visitor and Migrant Cost Recovery Programme, which required non-UK nationals to pay for non-urgent medical treatment at a 150 per cent of its normal cost. The immediate result of this policy was the effective transformation of NHS staff into border guards, tasked with checking the eligibility of patients. As stated by Satbir Singh, head of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants:

Nurses and hospital administrators are being asked to carry out the functions of an entry clearance officer as well as their own duties, without the expertise. It's a horrible situation to put them in; they have to use some sort of proxy. Typically those proxies will be your name, your skin colour, your accent. (as cited in Gentleman, 2019, p. 84)

As the quote exemplifies, without the proper training, NHS staff reverted to racist stereotypes to discriminate whose status to check. As will be exemplified in the following section, this, together with the extension of the UK border beyond its physical manifestation, revealed the prevalence of the ethos and mindset of the British Empire.

4.1.3.1. The Colonial Legacies of Racial Terror

Migration and law researcher Nadine El-Enany sustains that “[t]he 2017 Grenfell Tower fire and the 2018 Windrush scandal are illustrative of Britain as a domestic space of colonialism in which the racialised poor find themselves segregated and controlled,

vulnerable to deprivation, exile and death” (2020, p. 2).⁵⁶ For El-Enany, understanding Britain as a domestic space of colonialism contributes towards proving how the control and persecution of migrants and racialised people via policies such as the Hostile Environment are ongoing expressions of Empire which are sustained by law. In her words:

Britain’s borders, articulated and policed via immigration laws, maintain the global racial order established by colonialism, whereby colonised peoples are dispossessed of land and resources. They also maintain Britain as a racially and colonially configured space in which the racialised poor are subject to the operation of internal borders and are disproportionately vulnerable to street and racial terror (2020, p. 3)

Together with this, Wilson’s, Jeffrey’s and Marshall’s experiences of terror described above – as well as the Windrush scandal overall – are linked by Amelia Gentleman to Britain’s “long, guilty history of colonial occupation and exploitation” (2019, p. 9). With this, we can conclude that one of the consequences of the aforementioned socio-political context is the dissemination of forms of racial terror.

Sherene H. Razack defines racial terror as “systemic brutality that is defended as necessary [which] evicts from the circle of law and humanity those [racialized] persons deemed unable to progress into civilization” (2014, p. 4). Drawing from the work of Michael Taussig, and in particular his invitation to think “through terror as ‘the mediator par excellence of colonial hegemony’” (Taussig as cited in Razack, 2014, p. 4), Razack sustains that both racial violence and racial terror have a central role in the making of the modern world (2014, p. 2). With that, she defends that modernity, constituted on the intellectual discourse of the Enlightenment, is based on the idea of “man as a self-determined subject, as rational and emerging from a state of nature”

⁵⁶ On June 14th, 2017, a fire broke out in Grenfell Tower, a residential block of flats in North Kensington (London). The tower was part of Lancaster West, a housing estate built in the seventies to accommodate population displaced by slum clearances. As a result of the fire, seventy-two people died, most of them non-white. The deadly structural fire was the result of the installation of unsafe and highly flammable cladding in 2015 as part of the building’s refurbishing.

(2014, p. 3). This is opposed to the racialized other, understood as “a different kind of human, one reduced to body and unable to progress out of nature” (ibid.) against which racial violence is inflicted as part of the constitution of said modernity.

The concept of racial terror is also central to Paul Gilroy’s figuration of the Black Atlantic, first using it to condense the experience aboard the slave ship *Zong*, and understand the role J.M.W. Turner’s painting “The Slave Ship” had in the dissemination of said form of terror.⁵⁷ As Gilroy sustains: “Turner’s extraordinary painting of the slave ship remains a useful image [...] for its self-conscious moral power, and the striking way that it aims directly for the sublime in its invocation of racial terror, commerce, and England’s ethico-political degradation” (1993, p. 16). Thinking with Gilroy, the image of Turner’s slave ship can allow us to further delve into the connections between colonial endeavours and racial terror. In particular, Gilroy enlarges the image of the ship to serve two purposes in his discourse: firstly, the slave ship becomes the physical representation of the intertwined histories of modernity, its debt to the Enlightenment, and the institution of racial slavery; in Gilroy’s own words, “racial terror is not merely compatible with occidental rationality but cheerfully complicit with it” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 56). Secondly, the ship represents the crossing of routes which led to the formation of distinct Afrodiasporic cultures which are intrinsically tied to histories of racial terror. These cultural and political formations occupy a position which places them “simultaneously both inside and outside the western culture which has been their peculiar step parent” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 49). That is, Afrodiasporic cultural formations are both the response to and the object of a culture which is based on the dissemination and perpetuation, since colonialism, of forms of racial terror that privilege whiteness.

In her focus on immigration law, Nadine El-Enany shows how legislation has been used for material gatekeeping as well as for drafting a concept of British

⁵⁷ Turner’s painting, originally called “Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On” (1840) is currently on display at the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston). Following Turner’s Romantic style and evocation of the sublime, the painting is based on the *Zong* massacre I have previously discussed.

citizenship intertwined with whiteness. Succinctly, she argues that “British immigration law is a continuation of British colonial power as enacted in the former British Empire, an explicitly white supremacist project.” (2020, p. 17). The culmination of this project manifested in the 1971 Immigration Act and the 1981 Nationality Act. The Immigration Act stated that “only patrials, those born in Britain or with a parent born in Britain, had a right of abode, and therefore a right of entry and stay in Britain. In 1971 a person born in Britain was most likely (98%) to be white” (El-Enany, 2020, p. 4). In turn, the 1981 Nationality Act defined British citizenship on the basis of the 1971 Immigration Act, which, as El-Enany sustains “put the wealth of Britain, gained via colonial conquest, out of reach for the vast majority of people racialised through colonial processes” (2020, pp. 4–5). Both pieces of legislation need to be understood as part of an ongoing project that reveals Britain as the aforementioned “domestic space of colonialism” (El-Enany, 2020, p. 2) that systematically marginalises, controls and polices racialised people, where hegemony and wealth are, once more, sided with whiteness, and where forms of racial terror are used to ensure the conservation of said hegemony and wealth. These forms of state racial terror are inextricably linked to street racial terror, manifested in the form of street racism perpetrated by white British citizens. As such, we can conclude with El-Enany that both forms of racial terror are mutually reinforcing (2020, p. 30).

In the field of theatre studies, Michael Pearce has written about the relationship between racial terror and whiteness in Testament’s play *Black Men Walking*.⁵⁸ In his text, Pearce states that “[b]ecause whiteness describes the social, political and economic advantages that white people experience over black people and because these advantages are the result of these systems, whiteness can be understood as the historical legacy of acts of racial terror” (Pearce, 2021, p. 334).⁵⁹ The systems to which Pearce

⁵⁸ *Black Men Walking*, written by rapper Testament (Andy Brooks) and directed by Dawn Walton, premiered at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester on 22nd January 2018.

⁵⁹ As far as I am aware, at the time of writing this thesis Pearce’s text is the only other available work of theatre scholarship explicitly exploring the connections between whiteness and racial terror in British theatre.

alludes are “systems of subordination and extermination” (Pearce, 2021, p. 333) implemented during the long history of colonialism, and include, amongst others, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the Jim Crow Laws or the slave codes in British colonies, all of which are referred to in tucker green’s *ear for eye*. In fact, we can sustain that the prevalence of forms of racial terror in 21st century Britain is an example of unresolved racial tensions that can be traced back to the imperial inheritance, which is one of the central theses of the play; this same idea was also central to Paul Gilroy who sustained that “contemporary British racism bears the imprint of the past in many ways” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 142). This is achieved, according to him, through a historical process which aligned ‘race’ with the idea of national belonging (1993, p. 10), thus excluding, as has been mentioned before, racialized citizens from the definition of Britishness, which is consequently equated with whiteness.

4.1.3.2. Embodied Histories of Racial Terror

If, as Sara Ahmed reminds us, “[c]olonialism makes the world ‘white’” (2007, p. 153), we can also sustain that in *ear for eye* we witness multiple examples of the ways in which the racial terror produced by whiteness has been passed down from colonial times until the 21st century. And while in tucker green’s text, such inheritance is predominantly transmitted through words, as Ahmed foregrounds, these histories “surface on the body, or even shape how bodies surface” (2007, p. 154). In Part One of the play, scenes One, Six and Eight feature conversations between young Black men and their parents on how to navigate public space, and how to respond or react when they are stopped by the police. It is central to pay attention here to the fact that the scenes are written on the premise that the young Black men *will* be stopped by the police; it is not a question of *if* but a question of *when*, which can be better understood by thinking with Ahmed’s words on whiteness and racism. In her take, Ahmed argues that

[f]or bodies that are not extended by the skin of the social, bodily movement is not so easy. Such bodies are stopped, where the stopping is an action that

creates its own impressions. Who are you? Why are you here? What are you doing? [...] Black activism has shown us how policing involves a differential economy of stopping: some bodies more than others are “stopped”. (2007, p. 161)

In relation to these scenes, and to how they exemplify this differential economy of stopping, Lynette Goddard, using a different terminology, has noted how they can be connected to ‘the talk’ that Black parents have with their offspring to prepare them for their encounters with the police and prevent the fatal outcome of their child being killed (2021a, p. 80).⁶⁰ This talk is also indirectly referred to by bell hooks in her text “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination”(1992). Writing about whiteness as a form of terror, hooks notes how since slavery, Black people in the United States have shared with one another in conversations ‘special’ knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. Deemed special because it was not a way of knowing that has been recorded fully in written material, its purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society (hooks, 1992, p. 338).

This form of transmitting knowledge, what we could call a form of Black epistemology, features prominently in *ear for eye*, both in the US context and in scenes set in the UK, where characters orally transmit these forms of knowledge as to prevent and/or survive racist encounters.

The prevalence of these forms of black epistemology hooks describes can also be witnessed if we attend to the British context. In his account of the tensions derived from the arrival of West Indian workers from the Windrush generation, David Olusoga chronicles the first racial disturbances that took place in Liverpool in August 1948, and concludes that “[w]hat followed in Liverpool was intergenerational distrust of the police by the black community that lingered on into the 1980s” (2016, p. 491). What *ear*

⁶⁰ In 2015, the *New York Times* released a video called “The Talk” featuring Black parents explaining how they prepare their (mostly) male children for their future encounters with the police. The video can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXgfX1y60Gw&t=284s>

for eye shows is that the intergenerational distrust, transmitted also outside of official recorded material, is still prevalent in the 2020s, as can be observed throughout the scenes that reproduce ‘the talk’.

If we pay close attention to these scenes, we can further explore Ahmed’s argument that histories of racial terror surface in the body. At the beginning of Scene One, which is located in the US, we can read:

SON So if I put my hands up –
MOM a threat, threatening.
SON Slowly?
MOM Provocative.
SON Showed my palms
MOM inflammatory. Could be.
SON ... (If I) raised my hands just to –
MOM no
SON to just –
MOM no
SON but
MOM aggression
SON but just to show that they’re –
MOM an act of / aggression

(tucker green, 2018, p. 4)

As the scene unfolds, we are made aware of the fact that no option given by the son will be met with a satisfactory answer by the mother. The same pattern is replicated in Scene Six, which features the same characters and continues the conversation, and Scene Eight – located this time in the UK – where the discussion is centred again on where the young man should put his hands when he has an encounter with the police, as well as on how to look at them. The inclusion of a similar scene set in Britain dismantles the post-World War II consensus that, presumably, made racism

unacceptable in Britain. In fact, Olusoga highlights how “the intellectual demolition of race could not undo centuries of racial thinking. Millions of people had become habituated to the idea of race, and instinctively viewed the world in racial terms” (2016, p. xxi). Secondly, it highlights how any 21st century fantasies of Western countries being post-racial societies is a fallacy (Andrews, 2021, p. 7).

Throughout the three scenes, there is emphasis on how hegemonic structures of oppression surface on the body (the hands), how Black bodies are bound to frames of recognition that simultaneously render them hypervisible and invisible and how the Black gaze can be a site of resistance. Reading these scenes through Ahmed’s notes on the phenomenology of whiteness reveals the ways in which the Black body is constrained by the aforementioned structures of oppression: racism and coloniality. In particular, through her experience inhabiting a white world as a non-white body, Ahmed sustains that the invisible construction of whiteness – made invisible through privilege – “orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space, and what they ‘can do’” (2007, p. 149). This not only refers to and affects white bodies, but also, and most importantly, all those bodies racialized as non-white. In connection to this, the scenes where the young boys struggle with where to put their hands illustrate the ways in which their bodies do not belong to them, but to the overarching discourse that places whiteness as the norm, to the point where their body becomes an obstacle, as well as a form of entrapment.

Conspicuously, Ahmed also highlights the need to attend to historical and racial dimensions in order to appraise how bodies are oriented (2007, p. 153). In the discussed scenes, we can see that by paying attention to the many ways the movement of the hands of the young men is cautiously interrupted by the parents. Thus, every new movement of the hands is described by the parents – especially the mothers – as suspicious if filtered through the interpretative frame of the police. The young man’s movements in scene One are described respectively as: “belligerent”, “concealing”, “obscuring”, “cocky”, “masking”, “sarcastic”, “challenging”, “provocative”,

“incendiary”, “showing collusion”, “attitude”, “arrogance”, “insolence”, “ignorance” and “defiance”; as “aggressive”, “antagonistic”, “ignorant” and “hostile” (tucker green, 2018, pp. 4–6). While the list of adjectives continues throughout the scenes, the appearance of the term hostile, which is repeated twice for emphasis, establishes a connection between the play, and Theresa May’s infamous Hostile Environment previously discussed. Hostility is also at the core of Ahmed’s phenomenology of whiteness, when, thinking with Frantz Fanon, she proposes that certain bodies are “racialized, or made black by becoming the object of the hostile white gaze” (2007, p. 153). Encapsulated in the use of hostile therefore we find a history of oppression and discrimination rooted in racial terror.

Together with this, the focus on how inappropriate each movement of the hands is going to be for the young Black men also reveals how, as Ahmed teaches us, non-white bodies become hypervisible when, inhabiting white spaces, they do not pass (as white) and stand out (2007, p. 159). Focusing on how this scene was performed in the film we can observe the overarching reach of this. In the filmed version of Scene One, the clothes of the Son change with every new suggestion he makes on how to present his hands – his clothes include normcore wear, a Hawaiian shirt, and a hoodie. Each change of clothes then disrupts the here-and-now of the scene, aesthetically fragmenting it and suggesting that what we are witnessing is a situation that will be experienced by a multiplicity of different young Black men and their parents. Simultaneously, the change of clothes signals to the fact that Black men will be suspicious no matter what they wear. Yet, the danger they may face changes when the Son wears a hoodie, to which the Mom emphatically and insistently answers “don’t do that, don’t do that, don’t son” (personal notes).⁶¹ The mother’s emphatic and terrified response to the son’s hoodie, and to the danger it entails, is reminiscent of the killing of

⁶¹ This line, which I am quoting here from the film, does not appear in the published edition of the play. As indicated in the published text, the book went to press before the end of rehearsals (tucker green, 2018, p. 3) so the line might have also been added afterwards said in the staged play. Unfortunately, despite having seen the play at the Royal Court Theatre, I am not able to recall if this was the case.

Trayvon Martin. If, as Ahmed states, “whiteness allows bodies to move with comfort through space” (2007, p. 159), these scenes highlight how, when standing out, non-white bodies are expelled from such spaces. This is magnified in Scene Eight, which, as mentioned, is the only one of this collection of scenes on the talk set in the UK. In this case, although this is not indicated in the script of the play, the role of the Son was played by Jamal Ajala, the first Black deaf actor to play a role at the Royal Court stage. Throughout the scene, Ajala – who resumed the role for the 2021 film – delivered his lines in British Sign Language, thus, his form of communication was based on the use of body language, facial expression and hand gestures. Juxtaposed with the conversation, this revealed in a more painful and striking way the vulnerability of the Son’s body, as his body language – effectively his form of communication – could be, and as per tucker green’s standpoint in the play would be, mistaken for a form of aggression that would endanger his life when stopped by the police.

My memory of watching the play at the Royal Court Theatre is very much marked by the focus on the hands of the actors, especially Ajala’s. In scenes One, Six and Eight in Part One, the characters’ discomfort and fear concentrate on curtailing their hand movements. Because of how prominent the entrapment of the Black bodies in Part One was, and how pervasively that had been expressed through the impossibility of moving their hands in a way that would not lead to a form of racial violence, my focus watching Part Three was on the hands of the Caucasian actors and non-actors, which I perceived as moving unrestrained, freely and even exaggeratedly in comparison and contrast to the aforementioned discussed scenes. Watching the film three years later – where close up shots of the hands of Black actors feature prominently – I was made aware of how the movement of the white hands in Part Three was not as frantic as my unreliable memory recalled. Their movement, however, was enhanced in my memory by the sheer juxtaposition with scenes One, Six and Eight in Part One, as well as by the fact that, as a white spectator, I became aware, possibly for the first time, of how my own hands were granted a freedom I had been perhaps

intellectually aware of, but never physically. Suddenly, I was very uncomfortably aware of my own hands.

The talk between parents and their child does not focus only on the hands but also on the gaze. At the end of Scene One we can read:

MOM no. Don't turn your back, don't you turn your back.

MOM

Beat.

SON ... Mom.

Beat.

If I look away to avoid looking at –

MOM guilty

SON but-but if I look like I'm looking but just look past y'know –

MOM no

SON if I look like / that – ?

MOM no no no. Doesn't work, that –

SON if I –

MOM won't work

SON if I look at the floor –

MOM *hell no*, we didn't raise you to look at no floor Son.

SON If I – but if I...

 Then... But-but if I – .

He thinks.

Then-then... (tucker green, 2018, p. 9; emphasis in original)

As seen in this fragment, the contradictory and complicated relationship between Black bodies and the gaze is also revealed, as the son is both instructed not to look at the police in any way that can be seen as confrontational – which, from what we read in the scene, will be any option given by the son – but at the same time, he is emphatically

reminded that he should never look at the floor. A variation of the same conversation is repeated again in Scene Eight:

SON If I look...

MUM watches him.

 If I look at them – confidently look at / them.

DAD Yes

MUM Confronting.

DAD Yes

MUM no

DAD yes

MUM no / no

SON but if I look away –

DAD no

SON but if I look away –

DAD we didn't raise you to look away

SON but if I –

DAD you don't look away at nuthin, y'don't not look at nuthin, you don't look away Son, you don't avoid looking at nobody, not no, body, you don't look at the floor you don't look down you don't avert your gaze. We ain't raised you to do that. To be that.

SON ...But if I –

MUM guilt.

Guilty, aggressive aggressive aggressive subversive –

SON then –

DAD no.

MUM No.

(tucker green, 2018, pp. 57–58)

While the repetitions will be dealt with in the formal analysis of the play provided in section 4.1.4, it is important to mention here that this repetition, with the scenes set in different geographical contexts, strengthens the connection between the bodies of Black people – in this case especially young Black men – in the US and the UK, thus reminding us that forms of racial terror are prevalent in both territories and contexts. Together with this, paying attention to these two scenes foregrounds the complicated relationship between Black bodies and their gazes.

The policing of the Black gaze is another representation of racial terror. This is explored by bell hooks in her text “The Oppositional Gaze. Black Female Spectators” (2003) where she writes: “The ‘gaze’ has always been political in my life. Imagine the terror felt by the child who has come to understand through repeated punishments that one’s gaze can be dangerous. The child who has learned so well to look the other way when necessary” (2003, p. 115). In this quote, hooks foregrounds the connection between the Black gaze and terror, as any inappropriate gaze – considered as such by the hegemonic racial configuration – can be deemed dangerous and lead to punishment by the parents – used as a pedagogical tool to avoid greater harm – or worse, violence on the hands of the police, or any other configuration of state power. This fraught and traumatic relationship between Black bodies and their gazes has to be traced back to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, when enslaved Black people were punished by slave owners for looking back. In hook’s words: “[t]he politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze” (2003, p. 115). The inherited reproduction of this denial of their right to gaze across multiple generations has informed Black parenting, as we can see in both fragments from the play reproduced above, where the parents try to prevent their sons to gaze back at the police. Simultaneously, however, the Mom in Scene One states “*hell no*, we didn’t raise you to look at no floor Son” (2018, p. 9), a replica which resonates with the one uttered by the Dad in scene Eight: “we didn’t raise you to look away” (2018, p. 58). Both instances contain echoes of hook’s argumentation that suggests “[t]hat all attempts to

repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze" (2003, p. 116). The tension in the play between the instance where Black parents prevent the oppositional gaze and those where they encourage it encapsulates the inherent struggle that emerges when the possibility of forms or instances of Black agency emerges and underscore how, as hooks reminds us "[t]he 'gaze' has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally" (2003, p. 115). The recognition of this site of resistance is what prompts the parents to remind their children they have not been raised to look down.

4.1.3.3. Racial Terror and Gender Differences

Throughout these three scenes, and in more detail in Scene Six, tucker green also reveals how racial terror affects male and female identified bodies in a different way. In particular, tucker green approaches this difference through how parenting decisions are portrayed in the play.⁶² In the three scenes, the conversations to safeguard the life of their children are led by the Black mothers, highlighting how, as Goddard has claimed, Black mothers play a key role in the "support and survival of Black children" (2020, p. 112). This notwithstanding, the particularities of the forms of violence experienced by Black men are also highlighted, by stressing the ways their bodies *know*. In Scene Eight, we witness a brief disagreement between the parents on how to better have the talk with their son, where we can read the following exchange:

DAD So your kind of 'helping' is – this kind of helping / is – ?

MUM We can all do a you but I'm telling him something – we agreed we would
 – we agreed we would *have* to tell him / something.

⁶² Insofar as the focus of the play regarding gender difference within Black communities is predominantly centred on parenting, the discussion provided in this section will adhere to that. A more thorough discussion on the intertwined relations between racial and gender terror will be provided in the analysis of Travis Alabanza's *Burgerz*. This notwithstanding, it is important to note here that, despite the fact that the playwright has not made any public declaration on the matter, we can conclude that a transinclusive view of gender is favoured by debbie tucker green by attending to the inclusion of a nonbinary character amongst the cast in the film, played by nonbinary South African musician and actor Nakhane. Bearing this in mind, in this section I choose to adhere to the gender-inclusive forms male/female presenting/identified.

DAD I know

MUM 'you know'

DAD I would know I do know don't I? I'm trying I'm *trying* to – but how you're going at it how you're going at / him –

[...]

MUM You told me you got told like / this?

DAD You finished? Cos I'll talk to our son and let him know –

MUM tell him then tell him something / cos I'm –

DAD I'll let him know what I want to let him know, *how* I want to let him know ['cause I know] – and you're what?

MUM

DAD Yeh. Exactly.

(tucker green, 2018, pp. 54–55)

The phrase “‘cause I know”, added here from the film version, and not printed on the published play, contains the phenomenological experience of racism by which male presenting Black bodies are oriented towards experiences of a different nature of violence than those of female presenting Black bodies. With this, the play implies that, while all Black bodies are subjected to systemic violence, the forms in which this is expressed vary. In conjunction with this, the fact that this form of violence has been transmitted through generations is revealed when the son asks his father “what did you do with your hands” (tucker green, 2018, p. 48). This question encapsulates the son's realization that the violence he is experiencing is bound to a longstanding history of racial terror by which his ancestors were also affected. This is strengthened in the film where multiple close-ups of the hands of different, and mostly, Black men are shown.

If we pay attention to Part Two, we can see how female presenting bodies experience a form of violence that lies at the intersections of racism and sexism. Throughout the six scenes that form this second part, we witness how the young Black female character is talked over, belittled and dismissed by the older white man with

whom she is having a conversation, in what constitutes a clear example of misogynoir. Moya Baily coined ‘misogynoir’ to define “the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (2021, p. 1). This violence is based, amongst others, on the proliferation of stereotypes that continue to impact mainstream ideas about Black women that affect how they are both, perceived and treated. In the play, we can see this as a prevalent and underlying discourse that frames how Male relates to Female in Part Two. In connection to this, I want to highlight several moments in the scenes which condense one of the most prevalent stereotypes attached to Black women, that of the angry/emotional/problematic Black woman. As the conversation between Male and Female progresses, there are several instances when the woman’s interventions are discredited by either questioning her motifs, or by tone policing. The following excerpt serves to illustrate this:

FEMALE ...That I disagree I/ disagree

MALE Got that. Think I’m capable of ‘getting’ that, my problem is – my problem with you / is –

FEMALE I didn’t come here to be a problem

MALE my –

FEMALE I didn’t come here to be the problem, Sir.

(tucker green, 2018, p. 91)

The last replica by Female character, which she repeats twice, directly resonates with Sarah Ahmed’s statement “[w]hen you expose a problem you pose a problem” (2017b, p. 37), a statement she relates directly to the figure of the “feminist killjoy” (2017b, p. 10), and in particular to one who not only exposes instances of sexism but also racism.⁶³ Throughout the scenes in Part Two, the female character interrogates the

⁶³ The figuration of the feminist killjoy is defined by Ahmed as a feminist who openly shows her dissatisfaction with the status quo by raising uncomfortable questions and whose experiences are

permissiveness with which white mass shooters are treated in comparison to acts of violence perpetrated by Black men. In a monumental task of gruelling emotional labour, she dismantles all the arguments provided by Male, which are all directed towards justifying white mass shooters as victims of a dysfunctional family or as damaged by their immediate environment – “a boy who by all means had issues that may have been exacerbated by the leaving of his dad when he was twelve” (tucker green, 2018, p. 93); as lone wolves – “a *disaffected* right-wing radical” (tucker green, 2018, p. 97; emphasis in original); as young neurodivergent men – “Asperger’s – Autism one of those undiagnosed is suspected” (tucker green, 2019, p.109); or as copy-cat killers who have been radicalised online (2019, p. 114). What these examples foreground is both the incapacity of the man to conclude that white mass shooters can in any way be called terrorists, and the lengths to which he will go to excuse their behaviour as exceptional, and in no way part of systemic racism and racial terror. In that sense, Female’s questioning and constant reminder of how different the narrative would be if the shooters were Black becomes a problem for the man. As such, she becomes *the* problem.

As previously introduced, another strategy used by the male character to discredit the female is reverting to tone policing, which we can observe in the following exchange:

MALE what I was trying to say you’re-y’know taking it out of – and using it out of context. And it’s not helpful to make it personal and I didn’t need you to disclose –

FEMALE it’s not personal and I didn’t disclose I just made a / point

MALE disclosure is / personal.

FEMALE I didn’t ‘disclose’ anything I answered your question and made a valid point / that –

problematic if analysed by hegemonic understandings of what constitutes happiness, as she is reluctant to comply with the joys of patriarchal culture (Ahmed, 2017b)

aesthetics, I am expanding on Tyler's understanding of tucker green's theatre as an example of postcolonial dramaturgy, a reading which, I suggest, foregrounds my own reading of the play as an exploration of the racial terror produced by the British Empire and its aftermath. Tyler's thesis is grounded on the necessity to counter reading practices that "rehearse notions of literary universality" and apply a Western hegemonic framework to tucker green's work (2020, p. 139), which is the very same hegemonic framework that systematically produces the forms of racial terror the play denounces. In this sense, Tyler's proposal for a postcolonial reading practice can be taken alongside my own general proposal for a queer reading practice which decentres regimes of normality. As sketched earlier in this work, a queer reading practice opens an avenue of interpretation that privileges reparation. In the particular case of tucker green's work, reparation will be a key component of how the play engages the spectator, as the final interval of the thesis will suggest. Drawing on the work of Homi K. Bhabha, Tyler defines tucker green's dramaturgy as hybrid postcolonial dramaturgy, by which she understands the playwright's composite of Western dramaturgical elements together with transnational black aesthetics (2020, p. 132). Nandi Bhatia defines postcolonial dramaturgies as "sites of social and political activism that publicly interrogate the ongoing legacies of colonial histories" (2006, p. 5), which feature fluid and hybrid aesthetics, challenge power imbalances inherited from colonization and enslavement and, crucially, "interrupt colonial, patriarchal and national formations and histories" (2006, p. 8). In the particular case of female postcolonial dramatists, Bhatia suggests they have invented new dramaturgical languages, which in tucker green results in a structure that departs from Aristotelian influence, a poetic use of language and a prevalent foregrounding of mimetic representation. Altogether, this postcolonial dramaturgy requires a "counter-discursive reading practice" (Tyler, 2020, p. 138) which attends to tucker green's integration of transnational Black female aesthetics. My aim is to build on Bhatia and Tyler's proposals to ultimately suggest that tucker green's *ear for*

hang "lacks drama" because there is no real conflict in the piece, or Charles Spencer defining her writing as a "kind of rap poetry" in relation to *stoning mary*. (as cited in Tyler 2020, pp. 129-130)

eye develops an Afrodiasporic aesthetics. In order to do that, in the next sections I will focus on the play's dramatic shape, and in particular its use of loops, juxtapositions, repetitions, circles, and the use of multiple voices to explore racial terror through its aesthetics. Finally, I will turn to the film to analyse how the constant appearance of water is also an essential part of these Afrodiasporic aesthetics.

4.1.4.1. Dramatic Shape: Loops, Juxtaposition, Repetition, Circularity

Despite its three-part structure, *ear for eye* does not follow, in any way, a traditional Aristotelian dramatic form. Instead, we find a structurally complex and very rich play, where tucker green expands her usual denial of linearity and, as Elaine Aston has identified of her previous plays, she creates “a circular formation that loops narrative layers around a crisis that is difficult to resolve” (2020, p. 154). In this case, while Aston has privileged the image of the layer, I want to privilege that of the loop, which can be found in multiple instances in the play. In particular, I want to establish a connection between the play's structure and the musical loop, understood as a pattern or section of music that repeats itself for an indefinite amount of time; I will expand that by also looking at the connection between the play's form and the musical sample, understood as the reuse of a portion of sound, or in this case, a portion of dialogue. The link between tucker green's work and music, in particular Black musical forms, have already been pointed out by several scholars who have stressed the need to read tucker green's work within traditions of Black cultural productions (Aston, 2020, p. 154; Goddard, 2007, p. 185; Sawyers, 2020, p. 217), thus, I expand on their previous work to continue the task of reading tucker green without re-colonizing her theatre by approaching her only within a white, Western theatrical tradition. Although I will be referring to the connection between Part Two and David Mamet – which I will understand as a synecdoche for white Western theatre as I will further develop – I will read this section of the play as a response to the inability of white Western theatrical traditions to grant space to Black female voices.

As mentioned, if we look at the structure of the text, we can observe that the play is divided in three parts, followed by a very brief epilogue, yet, distancing herself from naturalistic theatre and Aristotelian conventions, Tucker Green abstains from presenting a model that follows Freytag's pyramid, thus avoiding a linear form that leads to the resolution of a conflict.⁶⁶ As will be seen, *ear for eye's* circular structure is also an example of Afrodiasporic aesthetics. The connection between the circle and Afrodiasporic cultures has been explored by several scholars. Saidiya Hartman's investigation on the afterlives of slavery *Lose Your Mother*, to which I will return in the last section of this chapter, closes with a group of girls in a circle formation singing about the diaspora (2007, pp. 234–235). In an interview published in *The White Review*, Hartman explains that

the circle is a central figure when trying to describe black radical imaginaries and anti-slavery philosophy [... it] is this deep, diasporic formation that travels with us. It's so rich with the potential of relation, possibility, care, other modes of understanding – it's the knowledge we have and make with one another. (Bulley, 2020).

This connection has been further mapped by Jason Allen-Paisant, who has linked the circle to the 'wheel and turn' – a dance move in Jamaican Mento music – as a metaphorical circular image that is opposed to Western ideas of progress and linearity.⁶⁷ As he puts it: "it evokes to me the cut and clear, in that, with every forward movement, there is also a circular movement in space. Every forward rhythm is accompanied by a looping" (2021, p. 364). The circle, as Allen-Paisant reminds us, is also evocative of gathering, ceremony, ritual.

⁶⁶ Developed by Gustav Freytag in the 19th century, Freytag's pyramid is a dramatic structure by which dramatic texts are organized into introduction, rise, climax, fall, and denouement or catastrophe. This leads to a clear plot construction which follows a teleological model.

⁶⁷ Mento is a style of Jamaican folk music predating reggae, and oftentimes related to Trinidadian calypso. It combines African rhythm with elements from European music, and its lyrics offer socio-political commentary. The 'wheel and turn' is one of the most repeated dance moves of Mento and consists of dancers spinning as fast as they can to the music, stopping abruptly and then spinning in the opposite direction.

The figure of the circle is ubiquitous throughout the play, and already present in *ear for eye's* stage picture, designed by Merle Hensel. During Part One the characters sit down on a crescent of chairs, an image which is mirrored in the film, where the crescent is a single structure which resembles a semi-circular bench.⁶⁸ The circle is completed by us, the spectators sitting at the Royal Court Theatre. The visual circle with which the play starts is emulated in its dramatic shape. Structurally, the most straightforward circle can be observed by the fact that Part Three, where in naturalistic theatre we would expect to find a resolution, offers instead the readings of the slave codes – chronologically the origin of the racial terror represented in Parts One and Two. This is further disrupted in Part Three, where the chronology of the scenes is reversed and further punctuated by the presence of the brief Epilogue at the end of the play where characters from Part One reappear. Together with this, the whole play functions as a sequence of loops where, by the repetition of samples, an endless, almost concentric circularity is created. Attending to the themes of the play, the circularity also foregrounds the entrapment of Black lives in a system that does not guarantee neither their livability nor their survivability. In this sense, the structure further supports the claim that tucker green's text aligns with Black radicalism, as no progress or survival can be achieved within the current system.

Paying further attention to the play's overall dramatic shape, I want to suggest that each of the parts of the play is written in a different voice, that can be linked to a different theatrical tradition with which tucker green establishes a conversation: Part One converses with Afrodiasporic cultural formations, Part Two with (Mametian) Western theatrical traditions, and Part Three with Verbatim drama. Simultaneously, the use of three juxtaposed and combined voices also places the play within an Afrodiasporic aesthetic tradition. In order to further delve into this argument, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's work on the prevalence of the figure of Ezili in

⁶⁸ It is important to note here that chairs are a common feature of tucker green's theatre. As Goddard has noted, "chairography" constitutes one of the stylistic elements of tucker green's theatre (2021a, p. 86).

Afrodiasporic femme and queer art and writing is illuminating.⁶⁹ In her work, Tinsley draws on Vodou epistemology, and in particular, on the premise that, one plus one equals three, which she explains as follows: “Vodou conceptions of human sentience work with the understanding that we come to *konesans* (knowledge) through the knowledge of the intellect [...] and spirit [...], yes, but also by that of our ancestors, who continue to live in our cells, psyches and imaginations” (2018, p. 23). While it would be far-fetched to suggest that Tucker Green’s play deals in any way with Vodou, considering her use of three juxtaposed voices in relation to Afrodiasporic epistemologies allows us to further expand the ways in which her theatre needs to be read as part of an Afrodiasporic tradition that reveals “a way of knowing that counters Enlightenment rationality” (Tinsley, 2018, p. 23). Just like Tinsley’s own text, we can also sustain that *ear for eye* is written in “a language of gaps, fissures, and queer assemblage” (ibid.), understood – by way of Puar – as “a series of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks [. . .] that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency” (Puar, 2007, pp. 211–212). The messy networks that result from the juxtaposition of three diverse theatrical voices, together with the construction of the play in and around the image of the circle or loop creates a reading/viewing experience which is uncomfortable, especially for the white/westernized spectator who may not be attuned to Afrodiasporic aesthetics. The white spectator’s discomfort will be discussed in the thesis second interval.

Part One, divided in twelve scenes, is perhaps the most fragmented and sampled of the play, to the extent that we could read it as both, a denounce of racial terror and a celebration of Afrodiasporic form. Looking at the characters list evidences how the

⁶⁹ I am thankful to my former student Adam Martín Grillo for bringing Tinsley’s work to my attention when he was working on the prevalence of the figure of Ezili in queer Caribbean writing for one of my classes. Likewise, I am indebted to my colleague Dr. Maria Grau for her timely reminder that *Ezili’s Mirrors* could help me delineate my argument. In her work, Tinsley draws on spiritual and immaterial afrodiasporic traditions to explore the ways in which the Ezili pantheon of Vodoun spirits – Ezili Je Wouj, Ezili Freda and Lasiren – have been evoked by queer Caribbean and African-American writers and artists. This helps Tinsley trace a theory of black Atlantic sexuality and black diasporic practices of survival and sketch a decolonial theorization of black feminism.

stories are fragmented and shuffled. For example, as previously discussed, scenes Four, Seven, Nine and Twelve feature the same characters; the same happens with scenes Two and Ten, and scenes One and Six respectively. Rearranging the fragments into their particular storylines takes work and effort – already pointing at the fact that the audience/reader is required to actively engage with the performance/text. Together with this, and besides the different fragmented storylines, there are connections between scenes that have to do with the repetition of replicas, situations happening in the UK and the US and experiences lived by men and women.

Scene Three, featuring a Black British woman who has been racially profiled and arrested – which Lynette Goddard has connected to the arrest and subsequent death of Sandra Bland (2021a, p. 83) – is mirrored by Scene Eleven, which shows the arrest of a Black British Man – which Goddard connects to the arrest of George Mpanga (2021a, p. 82).⁷⁰ Together with establishing a parallel situation, which serves to highlight how women can also be subjected to racially motivated police brutality, the connection between the scenes is also established by the repetition of replicas uttered by both characters, as if they were samples from a hip-hop track. Both scenes begin with practically the same lines:

⁷⁰ Sandra Bland was a 28-year-old African American woman who was found dead in a police cell in Waller County (Texas) on July 13th 2015, three days after being arrested. As Goddard chronicles, “[w]hile the official cause of death has been widely reported as suicide by hanging, questions have been raised about the circumstances leading up to Bland’s death” (2021b, p. 122). Based on the transcript of the dash-cam recording of her arrest, Mojisola Adebayo, together with director Omar Elerian, devised the performance *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland*, which was performed at the Bush Theatre as part of Reginald Edmund’s international project *Black Lives, Black Words* between the 23rd and the 25th of March 2017.

Scene Three

Y'know...

When I was sitting in that cell
they sat down by me and told me
what they could say to you

(2018, p. 16)

Scene Eleven

Y'know...

When I sat in that cell
and sat in that cell
and sat in that cell.
And he come in staying stood
telling me what they could say to you.

(2018, p. 69)

The sampling continues throughout the scene with the repetition of several lines, fragments and experiences to the extent that the scenes almost become the chorus of a song. Reading the beginning of both scenes side by side can better illuminate this idea:

Scene Three

When I was picked up and di'unt know
why

and asked.

And asked.

When they told me I was

'bein aggressive'

when I weren't.

When they said I was shouting

when I was speaking

then changed it to I was

'acting aggressive'

when I weren't. I was just askin.

(2018, p. 16)

Scene Eleven

When I was picked up and didn't know
why.

When they said I was

'bein aggressive'

and I weren't.

And I weren't.

And they said that I was shouting

when I was speakin.

I was speakin.

When they said I was actin aggressive

when I never was.

(2018, p. 6)

Together with these, the repetition of lines and structures is also found in scenes One and Eight and Five and Twelve respectively. Scenes One and Eight – which are centred around the talk and have been already widely discussed – feature repetitions of adjectives, fragments of conversations and forms of enquiry. In turn, the repetitions found in scenes Five and Twelve serve to establish another connection between characters and experiences. In this case, they connect the experience of Friend 2 – a Black British character which was played by a woman both in the play and film – and Young Adult – a young US man. Both scenes start with almost the same lines: “Idunsomethin Idunsomethin youseemedosomethin you see-me-do-the-thing-I-dun??!! (I) dun something – lissen-lissen – I dun-just-dun – did/ something” (2018, p. 33 and p. 74), and feature similar repeated or sampled lines throughout.

The sampling of lines and structures, which contributes towards the creation of loops can be read through the prism of tucker green’s influences within and from Black music, and is reminiscent, as Lea Sawyer’s has put it in relation to *trade*, of call-and-response structures (2020, p. 138), found in Afrodiasporic musical forms such as calypso, jazz or hip-hop.⁷¹ This connection is strengthened if we pay attention to the use of music in the film. As discussed earlier, during Part One, two hip-hop songs are played in the film: “Ooh La La” by Run the Jewels and “Hublot Handgun” by Vlad Moneybags, both of which share the same base.⁷² The use of the songs not only provides yet another loop in the structure of the play, but further connects the formal strategies used by tucker green to Afrodiasporic aesthetics.

⁷¹ Previous work connecting tucker green’s writing and music includes Lea Sawyer’s “Trading Voice and Voicing Trades: Musicality in debbie tucker green’s *trade*” (2020), which offers a reading of tucker green’s *trade* through attending to its musicality. While Sawyer’s exploration of how the text’s musicality offers different strategies of embodiment goes beyond the scope of the present study, it is important to note here how she also highlights the connection between tucker green’s writing and call-and-response structures, which she connects to repositories for collective memory.

⁷² Despite thorough research, I have not been able to locate the origin of the base. Looking at the release date of the songs, it would be easy to assume that the base, originally created for “Ooh La La”, was sampled in Moneybags’s version. Moreover, a search on WhoSampled database – a site created by Nadav Porav to identify sampled music, covers and remixes – traces no connection between the two tracks. The site shows that the song 1992 “DWYCK” by Gang Starr, is sampled in “Ooh La La”; however, what Run the Jewels have sampled is not the base, but a verse from Starr’s song, as well as the repeated phrase “Ooh La La”, giving title to the song.

In order to further explore this, I turn briefly to Paul Gilroy's theorization of Afrodiasporic cultures, in particular, his focus on how music is a key component in the construction of a Black Atlantic culture. In his defence of the need to revise the ways in which the intertwined histories of modernity and the African diaspora have been constructed, Gilroy highlights the hybrid nature of Black music in general, and hip-hop in particular, which he defines as rooted in the contact between different manifestations of Afrodiasporic cultures, and counters the essentialising of this genre as a 'pure' African American form.⁷³ With his arguments, he is essentially countering any claim that equates hip-hop to an absolute cultural form indicative of an African American essence and as example of "the principle symbol of racial authenticity" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 72). He also defends that Black vernacular forms such as hip-hop "exceed the frameworks of national [...] analysis" (1993, p. 35). This forms the basis for his proposal of a "distinctive counterculture of modernity" (1993, p. 36) crafted in opposition to hegemonic articulations of modernity rooted on the Enlightenment. Further, he claims that "this musical culture supplies a great deal of the courage required to go on living in the present. It is both produced by and expressive of that 'transvaluation of all values' precipitated by the history of racial terror in the new world." (1993, p. 36). Gilroy's argument is based on the strong conviction that Western ideas of rationality, and the cultural productions that sustain them, are complicit with colonial enterprises and the practice of racial terror; in this context, he suggests that we understand and approach Black vernacular musical forms such as hip-hop as "a philosophical discourse which refuses the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics" (1993, pp 38-39), together with this, he also underscores the need to attend to the residual traces of pain and terror contained in these musical forms (1993, p. 73). In short, Gilroy underscores the racial emancipatory potential of

⁷³ Throughout the book, Gilroy shows how the history of modernity has been constructed on the premise that "blacks enjoy a subordinate position in the dualistic system that reproduces the dominance of bonded whiteness, masculinity, and rationality" (Gilroy, 1993, pp. 45-46). This has contributed to the prevalent image of Blacks as "signs of irrational disorder" (1993, p. 45) versus the rationality of the Eurocentric Enlightenment project.

Black vernacular music as an Afrodiasporic form of ethical, political and aesthetic discourse in contexts where forms of racial terror are prevalent. This crucially resonates with the formal aspects of the first part of the play discussed, which allows me to conclude that tucker green examines racial terror not only through the themes of the play, but also through formally adhering to Afrodiasporic aesthetics that connect the play to Black vernacular music.

Part Two, as mentioned earlier, has been formally linked to David Mamet's play *Oleanna* (Cavendish, 2018; Goddard, 2021a; Hitchins, 2018).⁷⁴ In the chapter, I suggest approaching this not as a comparative reading with Mamet himself or *Oleanna* in particular, but rather, understanding this connection with Mamet as a synecdoche for white Western theatrical traditions. This reading opens a new interpretation of the scene, where together with thematically offering, as discussed, further avenues of enquiry of the forms racial terror takes, we can read the scene as an example of how traditional Western theatrical forms do not let Black women speak or thrive. The reference to this play (which we could identify as representative of a white, patriarchal theatrical tradition) can be interpreted as a comment on the limitations of this form and tradition for the black woman. She is not allowed to be. She is perpetually silenced, doubted and diminished. This proposed interpretation of the scene can be sustained by looking at how tucker green's own theatre has been received by white critics. Together with some of the reviews of *ear for eye* previously discussed at the beginning of the chapter, tucker green's theatre, and in particular her aesthetics, have been categorised by Michael Billington as "not the same as drama" (as cited in Tyler 2020, p. 129) or by Aleks Sierz as lacking drama and conflict (ibid.). Both comments stem from approaching tucker green's work through the prism of a Western theatrical tradition, and thus failing to recognize her own contributions to Black British and Afrodiasporic

⁷⁴ David Mamet's two-hander *Oleanna* was first performed at the Hasty Pudding, Cambridge, Massachusetts, on the 1st May 1992. The British premiere took place on the 24th June 1993 at the Royal Court Theatre, London, where it was directed by Harold Pinter.

theatrical forms, in a similar way to which Male in Part Two fails to recognise Female's contributions to the analysis of forms of racial terror Male does not acknowledge.

The final part of the play consists on the recorded verbatim reading of fragments from Jim Crow Laws (Scene One) and British (Jamaican) and some French creole slave codes (Scene Two). These are delivered direct to camera by US and UK Caucasian actors and non-actors respectively, a choice that disrupts tucker green's indication in regards to parts One and Two, which clearly indicates “[n]o direct address to audience” (2018, p. 3). In his review for *The Independent*, theatre critic Paul Taylor identifies the use of white actors/non-actors as reminiscent of the “tactic tucker green used in *stoning mary* [...where] she jolted us into a fresh perception of the insupportable agonies of the third world by presenting them as if they were being suffered by white people in Europe now” (2018). While the little presence of white characters/actors in tucker green's work is testament to her strong commitment to centre Black lives and Black stories, the use of white actors here is not part of the same dramatic exercise she carried out in *stoning mary*. Neither the fragments from Jim Crow Laws, nor those from British (Jamaican) or French slave codes are read so that white people imagine what it would be like to suffer these terrible atrocities, but so that white people examine and interrogate whiteness, and become fully conscious of our active role in the suffering of Black people.

Interrogating the use of verbatim, another different voice within the play, a further connection can be established with discourses on terror and how they have been explored in contemporary British theatre. As Ariane de Waal has noted in her work, in the aftermath of 9/11 – and therefore operating within the hegemonic epistemological framework of terror discussed in Act One of this thesis – a resurgence and prevalence of verbatim and other documentary forms of theatre has been linked to the ‘war on terror’ (2017, p. 4). While I share de Waal's misgivings to the claim that “documentary drama is particularly representative of British theatre in the long ‘war on terror’ decade” (ibid.), a claim that her own work dismantles, the use of verbatim in a

play which explores forms of racial terror merits some interrogation. One way of reading this ‘third voice’ is that of using a theatrical form linked to the exploration of hegemonic terror to shed light on silenced and overlooked forms of terror such as racial terror. Together with this, the use of verbatim in theatre that dealt with the ‘war on terror’ was justified by scholars as a way to respond “to a perceived democratic deficit in the wider political culture” (Megson as cited in de Waal 2017, p. 4), as well as a way to challenge hegemonic versions of events by having ‘unaltered’ access to the truth.⁷⁵ In this case, the unaltered truth offered in *ear for eye* affords a direct passage to the origins of racial terror. Yet, despite the authority granted to and praise received from critics by some early 21st century verbatim plays (Bottoms, 2006, p. 59), *ear for eye*’s third part was described by some reviewers as “a bluntly accusatory finger-jab in the eye” and “a tightly reductivist bow” (Cavendish, 2018), “a lecture that doesn’t quite know when to end” (Treneman, 2018), or as “a dip in energy” (Hemming, 2018). Coincidentally, these commentaries were part of reviews which, as will be further discussed in the last interval, orbited around the critic’s own discomfort.

Together with presenting a third voice that converses with a distinct theatrical tradition, the use of video recording to deliver these lines, instead of having them read on stage, produces a distancing – Brechtian if you will – effect, which creates a space for the audience to interrogate their connection with the material presented.⁷⁶ In particular,

⁷⁵ According to Stephen Bottoms, the proliferation of documentary and verbatim plays in the aftermath of 9/11 is not surprising, as dramatic fiction became “an inadequate response to the current global situation” (2006, p. 57). The spread of verbatim drama in Britain – as opposed to its presence in US stages – is further justified by Bottoms as based on the premise that “most Britons still believe (somewhat gullibly?) in the underlying truth/reality of the news as mediated by the BBC and by newspapers such as the Guardian” (ibid.) It is important to highlight that the very notion of unaltered access to the truth is already made fragile by the editing process which involves a playwright selecting the real-life fragments of an original document or transcript that will be part of a verbatim play.

⁷⁶ My use of the term Brechtian here needs to be understood in connection only with Brecht’s distancing techniques that contribute towards the Alienation-effect of *Verfremdungseffekt*, which are used to prevent the audience from emotionally identifying with the actors and instead transform them into critical observers. Despite the fact that the connections between Brechtian theatre and tucker green are many – see for example the analysis of the use of projected titles in *stoning mary* as an evocation of Brechtian placards in (Fragkou & Goddard, 2013) or the discussion of the lack of mimetic representation as a form of Brechtian alienation in *dirty butterfly* (Monforte, 2015) – a more thorough analysis of this connection goes beyond the scope of the present study.

the use of Caucasian actors and non-actors produces another loop, in this case, one that mirrors the “imagined white neoliberal audience” (Abram, 2014, p. 115) of the Royal Court theatre. This referential loop invites the white audience to interrogate their role in the forms of racial terror which, as the play shows, have their origin in the imperial project that produced the slave codes and Jim Crow Laws being read, and is responsible for the contemporary forms of racial terror that have been examined throughout the play.

4.1.4.2. Water: “a trail of kin to guide us home”

A focus on the film allows us to locate one final element that is a key component of Afrodiasporic aesthetics, and that is the presence of water. While there are no references to water throughout the play, in the film we can observe multiple shots where water is featured. In her previously cited work on Ezili, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley writes about the waters used by Haitians and concludes that, for those who occupy precarious social positions, bodies of water are both a source of household water and a garbage dump, transforming water into an archive of their past and a prediction of their future (2018, p. 12). I want to expand on this idea of water as an archive for the dispossession suffered by Black lives in the play / film.

The film opens with the group of actors that will feature in Part One filmed from above and standing/walking in a pool of water, which is featured repeatedly again in Part One Scene Five, where we see the character of Friend 2 standing and kneeling in a pool of water. This pool of water reappears again in the transition between Part Three and the film’s Epilogue, where rain is also featured. This final shot connects again with the image of the loop, and the cyclical nature of the states of water. The presence of water, together with the rest of aesthetic elements discussed throughout this part, strengthens the connection between *ear for eye* and Afrodiasporic aesthetics. Together with the previously mentioned poetry collection *Zong!*, the image of water as representation of the Black diaspora that resulted from the Transatlantic Slave Trade

has been prevalent in Afrodiasporic art and literature, where its connections to the Atlantic Ocean are indisputable. In this sense, the pools of water that keep reappearing in the film can be seen as standing for this Atlantic Ocean, which, as poet Danez Smith writes, contains “a trail of kin to guide us home” (2017, p. 25). For Rinaldo Walcott, “the relationship Black people have to bodies of water [is foundationally formative of blackness] to the extent that “blackness itself is birthed in salt water” (2021, p. 65) which is both a site of black death and “the birth of the very foundation of capitalism and post-Enlightenment global life” (2021, p. 66), which as previously discussed, constitute the origin of racial terror against Black lives. Encapsulated within the images of water that appear in the film, we can find the histories of racial terror that constitute the aforementioned archive of the dispossession Black lives endure since the advent of modernity.

4.1.5. The Afterlives of Enslavement: Unfinished Temporalities, Livability and Worldmaking

In this final section, the play’s overall exploration of the afterlives of enslavement is read alongside its signalling towards unfinished temporalities to suggest that ultimately, tucker green offers an exercise of collective memory that aims to underscore the livability and worldmaking capacity of Black Lives and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The term ‘afterlife of slavery’ was first used by Saidiya Hartman in her text *Lose Your Mother. A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), where she stated:

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperilled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. (Hartman, 2007, p. 4)

One of the ways in which the play engages with this is through the disruption of teleological temporalities. This is achieved by the aforementioned discussed presence of loops, juxtapositions, repetitions and circles, which interrupt the flow of linear, progressive temporal development. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in an unusual interview published in *The Guardian* coinciding with the release of her film, debbie tucker green expressed that, contrary to what she felt with her previous work, once the final curtain fell on closing night, this time she was not done with the play (Jones, 2021). I want to connect this not-being-done-with with the concept of the unfinished to explore the ways in which, through its formal circularity, hegemonic temporalities are challenged in the play.

Both Sara Ahmed and Paul Gilroy have established connections between Blackness, whiteness and the notion of the unfinished. While Ahmed has sustained that racism – built on how whiteness coheres as a world – is “an ongoing and unfinished history” (2007, p. 165), Gilroy has claimed that the Black identity is an unfinished identity (1993, p. 1). Together with this, and as already presented in the section on racial terror above, Nadine El-Enany sustains that the British colonial project is also unfinished. Taken together, these three premises suggest that there is an overarching unfinished history containing and pertaining to notions of imperialism, Blackness and whiteness. This crucially resonates with my own previous work on the role of silences in tucker green’s work and their connection to the notion of the unfinished (Massana, 2020b). Writing about the role of silences in the 2011 play *truth and reconciliation*, I drew on Catalan philosopher Marina Garcés’s to suggest that in tucker green’s work, silences are ethical spaces where the spectator is encouraged to engage with unfinished histories of racism, systemic violence and conflict. In particular, Garcés’s notion of the unfinished was activated alongside the figure of the spectator to contend that (white, affluent) spectators were invited to ethically respond to the unfinished histories presented in the play, by doing the emotional labour of unpacking them from their own positions of privilege (Massana, 2020b, p. 268). Marina Garcés work presents the

unfinished as a radical proposition to dismantle binaries based on the premise that the 20th century is unfinished because (1) our present is in historic continuity with it, and (2) because the problems caused by the 20th century have not yet been solved. Most importantly, she argues that a finished history is a version of history that presents a unified meaning, one that can be grasped and analysed, and one that aligns with the hegemonic version of history (2015, p. 16). Distinctively, the unfinished lacks this unity.

The unfinished nature of racial terror is explored thematically in the play by referring to its long histories. Together with historical references such as the aforementioned discussed allusion to the figure of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Scene Two in Part One conjures up in the mind of readers/spectators the hoariness of racism and its histories of resistance. In the scene, an older (wo)man – played by actress Angela Wynter in the Royal Court production and Carmen Munroe in the film – claims her longstanding and persisting presence, existence and struggle. Drawing on the use of anaphora by repeating the word ‘before’ – a repetition that constitutes yet another loop – the (wo)man traces her and her community’s endurance and resistance to forms of racial terror, which are contained in fragments such as the following:

Before our children had
no chance
had no change
to be children,
had no choice
have no choice
but to be
involved.
[...]
Before our losses were reduced
to known names only

reduced to a

fashion.

When in fashion

Or

forgotten.

Conveniently.

Then denied. Conveniently.

(tucker green, 2018, pp 12-13).

This is coupled with a form of remembering in the play that is articulated through the body and epitomised in the repetition of the image of the hands, one that constitutes a visual anaphora of the unfinished nature of racial terror. However, in *ear for eye*, the unfinished not only refers to the historic continuity with the 20th century that Garcés emphasizes in her articulation of the term, but rather, what the play shows is the historic continuity of the British colonial project – as tucker green puts it “the conversation has been there for 400 years” (Jones, 2021) – which is made evident by the inclusion of Part Three to signal at its origins.

Likewise, attending to the circles and loops in *ear for eye*, a similar connection with the unfinished can be made, one that is associated with the ways in which the play dismantles linear temporalities and stresses the on-going legacies of racial terror and the afterlives of enslavement, while also pointing at “a completely different cosmology” (Brathwaite as cited in Allen-Paisant, 2021, p. 364). This Afrodiasporic aesthetic element previously analysed, is also connected to an understanding of time that departs from the Western ethos of linear progress. In the film, the circularity is further accentuated by visual references to the passing of the seasons between scenes in Part One, which are used to highlight the return of the seasons, and therefore the coming-back, going-back, the circle, instead of the linear progress.

The connection between the play and non-hegemonic temporalities can be further stressed by looking at race as a temporal category, a proposition borrowed from

the work of El-Enany. Going back to Sarah Keenan and Edward Said, respectively, she draws attention to the fact that race can be understood as temporally bound “in terms of how long racialised subjects are able to survive in the world” (El-Enany, 2020, p. 26), which implies that racialised people occupy “a time that is over” (ibid.). This point can be further illuminated by drawing on the work of Riley C. Snorton, who traces how Black (and trans) lives challenge “the biocentrism and linear temporality that constructs ‘life’ in universal terms” (2017, p. 185). The disruption of the teleological temporality that governs Western understandings of life and death is further stressed by “numerous black diasporic spiritual practices [which] are firmly rooted in a belief in the enmeshment of life and death, giving expression to a continuity of black sociality in the form of communing with the ancestors or in the afterlives” (ibid.). So far, I have proposed a reading of Part Three of the play as an example of the unfinished nature of British coloniality, and as the point of origin of contemporary forms of racial terror, that is, as an exercise of collective memory of Britain and the US’s colonial pasts and presents. I want to add a third, parallel, interpretation, one that reads this part as a ‘form of communing with the ancestors’; that is, a form of Afrodiasporic spiritual practice that acknowledges the connections with the lost lives of the enslaved population, appearing in the lines of the slave codes read in Part Three. This spiritual practice contributes towards collapsing the time-line between past and present.

Despite the impulse to read this exercise of looking back as proof of an adscription to chronological, teleological time, Castiglia and Reed’s work on queer temporalities suggests that “contemporary theorists of queer temporality [...] advocate for memorial connections with the spectral past as a way to imagine more viable social models in the present” (2011, p. 14). Relating this to the circle in Afrodiasporic cultures a similar impulse can be observed, one in which livability is articulated through ideas of return and repetition. The strong connection between the circle and the community emphasizes how, despite its apparent bleak themes – racial terror, systemic violence and the unfinished nature of the British colonial project – through its form, as well as

through its connection to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, we can infer instances of worldmaking. On this final point, Snorton sustains that “Black (Trans) Lives Matter provides a conceptual framework to understand the ongoing struggle in the present by way of a future (aspiration) in which black lives will have mattered to everyone” (2017, p. 198). It is this future aspiration that provides us with a template for a different world – one perhaps already imagined by Black radicalism – where the system will not be built on the unlivability of Black lives. This notwithstanding, the play does not apparently provide any glimpse as to what the new system should be, thus, we could say that apparently, it does not engage in a worldmaking project. Yet, as Nicola Abram writes, Black British women have used theatre and performance to make themselves visible and resist objectification, because, “[b]y combining visual and verbal modes of representation, theatre invites its audiences both to look and to listen, and thereby to recognise ourselves in relation to others. When we do, we are called to new ways of being in the world” (2020, p. 3). Attending to this quote, therefore, we could claim that perhaps all Black British theatre by women is already part of a worldmaking project, one based on the recognition and uplifting of Black lives.

I take a selfie before I go outside to remind myself of
how I looked in that moment.

To archive my existence before physical danger.

To remind myself of how I looked before I change.

I take a selfie before I go outside to remind myself of
how I looked in that moment.

To remind myself that it is not me who is the problem,
more than the world that cannot hold me.

Travis Alabanza, *Before I Step Outside [You Love Me]*

(2017a)

4.2. Travis Alabanza's *Burgerz* (2018)

4.2.1. Situating *Burgerz*

Burgerz (2018a) is a play written and performed by Travis Alabanza, a Black-mixed, working class, transfeminine gender non-conforming, performance artist and theatre maker from Bristol, who grew up in a council estate.⁷⁷ In 2015, they toured their first solo show “Stories of a Queer Brown Muddy Kid” in bookstores, clubs and other venues in the UK, and in 2016, they became the youngest recipient of the artist in residency programme at Tate Galleries; since then, they have performed their work in multiple venues including Tate Britain, Rich Mix London, Hamburg International Feminist Festival, the V&A, or Glasgow’s Transmission Gallery.⁷⁸ In 2017, they released *Before I Step Outside [You Love me]* their debut chapbook featuring a mixture of poetry, images and diary entries exploring the experience of being a trans person in public space. *Burgerz*, directed by Sam Curtis Lindsay first opened at the Hackney Showroom in 2018 and was produced in collaboration with the Ovalhouse, the Royal Exchange Theatre and the Malborough Theatre.⁷⁹ It run for four weeks at the Traverse Theatre during the 2019 Fringe Festival in Edinburgh and it then toured both nationally and internationally. Initially closing with a series of sold-out performances at London’s Southbank Centre, Alabanza toured the show in the US in 2022 after the

⁷⁷ Travis Alabanza is of African American, Filipino and white-European heritage. Although they used to refer to themselves only as Black, as of recently they have started to use the form Black-mixed to counter assumptions that mixed-race refers only to black and white heritage, to honour their Filipino heritage and to understand, as well as to make visible the nuance and multiplicity of experiences within the Black community (Silvers, 2021).

I use the term transfeminine as an umbrella term to refer to both trans women and femme presenting nonbinary and gender non-conforming people.

⁷⁸ Some of Alabanza’s performances prior to the opening of *Burgerz* can be found online. Together with short clips, full performance pieces available include “The Other'd Artist with Travis Alabanza” performed at Glasgow’s Transmission Gallery in June 2017 (<https://www.transmissiongallery.org/Calendar/The-Otherd-Artist-with-Travis-Alabanza/33>); “Left Outside Alone”, Alabanza’s response to the Tate Modern exhibition *Queer British Art (1861-1967)*; performed at the Tate Modern in July 2017 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3vm7OQjcQw&t=1s>)

⁷⁹ In 2020, the off-West End theatre Ovalhouse, located in Kennington Oval, in the borough of Lambeth, closed and sold their premises. In 2022, the theatre reopened under the name Brixton House in 385 Coldharbour Lane, in Brixton. The new theatre, under the artistic direction of Gbolahan Obisesan, retains the community-oriented spirit of the Ovalhouse.

travel restrictions for the Covid-19 pandemic were lifted.⁸⁰ The play is based on a public act of violence suffered by the artist in April 2016, when someone threw a burger at them and shouted a transphobic slur as they walked over Waterloo Bridge at 2pm in broad daylight. “I think over one hundred people saw and I know no one did anything” (Alabanza, 2018a, p. 7), they say at the beginning of the show. All through the play, Alabanza recalls their experience while cooking a burger with the help of a cisgender white man from the audience with whom they engage in a partially non-scripted dialogue, addressing the audience’s complicity in such transphobic acts and inviting them to acknowledge not only the violence of the act of throwing a burger, but also “the violence in the surrounding moments after that attack” (Alabanza, 2017b). The play concludes with Alabanza inviting a cisgender white woman – who stands for the people who witnessed the attack and did nothing – to read a pledge to protect trans people.

Dressed in blue overalls and working boots, Alabanza enters a stage resembling a warehouse “*with a giant box centre stage*” (Alabanza, 2018a, p. 7). As they unbox the set – designed by Soutra Gilmour – which is dominated by a kitchen island, they recall both their accident, how that prompted an obsession with burgers, and their relationship with gender, before revealing that they need to make a burger and that they need help from an audience member, ultimately choosing a white cisgender man to help them. As the man from the audience walks onto the stage, he is given a recipe book, a binder containing part of the scripted dialogue he will be asked to read out loud. The exchange between Alabanza and the man is framed by both the script in the binder as well as a series of questions Travis asks him. Together with the questions, and showing their remarkable skills at hosting queer performances, Alabanza jokes with the man and insightfully comments on white cisgender masculine privilege with statements such as “not the first time a white man’s got a job he’s not qualified for” (personal

⁸⁰ At the time of revising the thesis, Alabanza has announced a final run of *Burgers* at the Southbank Centre (London) between the 8th and the 12th of March 2023.

notes) when the man confesses he cannot cook or “[w]hite man applauded for walking. Groundbreaking” (Parsons, 2019), when he returns to his seat after helping Travis.

My choice to write about *Burgerz* is framed by José Esteban Muñoz’s affirmation that “the best performances do not disappear but instead linger in our memory, haunt our present, and illuminate our future” (2009, p. 104). This is particularly relevant in the present context, given the topic the play explores and the rising climate of transphobia, both in the UK, where the play was created, and in Spain, where I am based. Muñoz reminds us that “such performances do not disappear but instead remain and, like performatives in J. L. Austin, do things in the future” (2009, p. 109). We are now living in the future of *Burgerz*, and in this future right-wing bigotry and trans-exclusionary radical feminism continue to uphold transphobia and contribute to a climate of violence directed mostly towards transfeminine black people, what Alabanza has referred to as “an epidemic of violence that faces trans and gender non-conforming people every day” (2017b). As Stephen Greer’s study of solo performances *Queer Exceptions* states, drawing on Deirdre Heddon, autobiographical performance is a means “to reveal otherwise invisible lives, to resist marginalization and objectification and to become, instead, speaking subjects with self agency” (as cited in Greer, 2019, pp. 4–5). Yet, *Burgerz* is not a play just about Alabanza’s autobiography, nor is it a coming out story, or a confession. Taking their experience of public harassment, Alabanza crafts a meticulous in-depth study of the active choice “in the silence of protecting trans and gender non-conforming people in public” (Alabanza, 2017b). As they have stated, referring to the witnesses of the burger incident as bystanders “suggests something that is so much more passive than what is happening” (Alabanza, 2017b).

In the process of creating the play, Alabanza hosted a series of dinner conversations throughout the UK with trans and gender non-conforming people called *Tranz Talks*. These talks were audio recorded with the aim of creating an archive of trans experience in the UK, which will become part of the LGBTQ+ Archive at the Bishopsgate Institute. At the moment of writing this thesis, these files are still kept at

the personal archive of the Hackney Showroom – which I was very lucky to have access to – together with two video recordings of the plays, a series of short clips recording audience responses to the show, as well as a series of short clips or vox pops recording testimonies of some of the participants in *Tranz Talkz* about their experiences as gender non-conforming people in the UK.⁸¹ In January 2022, Alabanza held an online edition of *Tranz Talkz* as part of the 2022 Midsumma Festival, one of the biggest LGBTQIA+ festivals in Australia. Coinciding with this, the short film *Burgerz and Chips with Travis Alabanza* was released online via YouTube, a specially commissioned film produced by Hackney Showroom & Arts Projects Australia and featuring racialized trans artists CHIYO, Octavia Nyombi and Eburn Sodipo, alongside Alabanza. The short film is based on the same format as *Tranz Talkz* and is part of Alabanza’s project of archiving trans lives. In my discussion of *Burgerz* I will be referring to the published play text, personal notes taken during my own attendance at the show during its run at the Traverse Theatre as part of the Edinburgh Fringe 2019, as well as to the aforementioned described archived material available at the Hackney Showroom and YouTube.

This chapter is organized as follows. Firstly, by unpacking the phrases ‘the transgender tipping point’ and ‘the transgender issue’, I discuss the context of backlash

⁸¹ I want to express my deepest gratitude to Nina Lyndon and Sam Curtis Lindsay, co-artistic directors of the Hackney Showroom for their invaluable help. After approaching them with a question about *Tranz Talkz* they very quickly offered me the possibility to spend one day in their studio space listening to the audio files and watching all the recorded material available; having access to it profusely shaped this chapter. I am also grateful to Stef Dickers, Special Collections and Archive Manager at the Bishopsgate Institute for his enthusiasm with my work and his help with tracking this material. Once submitted, a copy of this thesis will be donated to the Bishopsgate Institute to be part of their LGBTQ+ archive. All quotes from this material included in the chapter come from my own transcriptions of the audio recordings available at the Hackney Showroom; some quotes have been slightly edited for clarity. All the transcriptions of the material will be donated to the Hackney Showroom, and ultimately included in the material that will become part of the Bishopsgate Institute archives. Donating this material is not only a way to express my gratitude but is also part of my will to contribute to the work these institutions do to counter racism and transphobia. I am indebted to the conversations with my friends and fellow twerking colleague Paola Bernal and twerking teacher Ana Chinchilla (Anchi) that allowed me to reflect on how to ethically collaborate with racialized and transgender artists as a white cisgender researcher. Vox pops, from the Latin Vox Populi [voice of the people] refers to short interviews with members of the public. I will use this term to refer to the short interviews recorded by the Hackney Showroom, to keep with their own terminology.

against trans people in which *Burgerz* was created. Secondly, the chapter looks at ‘gender critical’ discourses as well as colonial legacies of gender to define what is understood, in the context of the thesis, as ‘Gender Terror’, sustaining that one particular form of gender terror that can be found in the play is ‘transmisogynoir’. Thirdly, I will focus on the form of the play by looking at the creation of a trans archive as a form of promiscuous ethics of care and the use of food in the play. Fourthly, by focusing on temporality through the terms ‘temporal drag’ and ‘queer utopian memory’ the chapter explores how the play’s relationship with the past and the treatment of time contributes towards the establishment of a community, which leads to the final section that foregrounds the instances in which this results in forms of queer worldmaking.

4.2.2. Between the ‘Transgender Tipping Point’ and the ‘Transgender Issue’

Burgerz was performed around the time of the public consultation for the reform of the Gender Recognition which put trans lives under scrutiny. Following the laws in place in other European countries, a consultation to reform to the 2004 Gender Recognition Act took place between the 3rd of July and the 22nd of October 2018 under Theresa May’s Tory government.⁸² The proposed reform was designed to ease the process of changing one’s legal gender and obtain a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC), in order to de-medicalise the process and uphold the principles of gender self-declaration, following the recommendation of the Women and Equalities Select Committee Inquiry on Transgender Equality (Faye, 2021). While this was welcomed by the trans community, activists voiced that a thorough reform of trans healthcare would be more

⁸² The Spanish Coalition Government has drafted a new LGBTQI+ bill, popularly known as “La Ley Trans” (the trans law), which, amongst other aspects, will grant people over 16 the right to change one’s legal gender without the need of a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria, external testimonies validating their trans identity or the requirement of undergoing two years of hormonal treatment. The law also bans conversion therapies, regulates the rights of intersex people to prevent medical intervention to alter their sex unless it is necessary for health reasons, and facilitates the access to assisted reproduction in the public healthcare system to lesbian, bisexual and single women. At the time of writing the law has been approved by the Spanish Cabinet and Parliament, and is pending final approval by the Senate.

desirable, as most saw the consultation as nothing more than a liberal gesture and “a cheap way to signal [the Government’s] benevolence to the trans community” (Faye, 2021, p. 87). Together with the consultation – to which the Government received 102,818 valid responses – the Government Equalities Office met with around 140 organisations to hear their views, including LGBTQI+ organisations as well as organisations working on women’s rights (King, Paechter, & Ridgway, 2020, p. 7). However, despite receiving wide support to the different aspects of the reform – with up to 80% of responses in favour of removing the requirements for a medical certificate to transition (King et al., 2020) – the British Government, now under the leadership of Boris Johnson, decided not to update the Gender Recognition Act, which means that the self-determination process will not be introduced, and the process to obtain a Gender Recognition Certificate will not be de-medicalised.

One of the direct consequences of the consultation was the increased public scrutiny of trans lives leading to clashes between trans activists and trans-exclusionary radical feminists (Chamberlain, 2017, p. 174), where the latter voiced their concern when faced with the possibility of allowing trans women to gain access to women-only spaces, as they considered this would potentially put cis women at risk. However, the conversation eluded the risk faced by trans people in public space. As Alabanza stated, “[t]he news is filled everyday with debates about whether or not trans people are a danger to society – but no one is talking about the dangers we face from the rest of society” (Alabanza, 2018a, unnumbered). The recent publication of a transphobic hate crime report by Dr Cerys Bradley from Galop, UK’s LGBT+ anti-violence charity, shows an increase of high levels of transphobic violence and abuse faced by gender non-conforming people in the UK on a regular basis, exemplifying how LGBTQI+ hate crime is disproportionally on the rise. One of the key aspects that the report highlights is the real-life consequence of framing the existence of trans lives as a public debate (Bradley, 2020, p. 2), the violence and abuse reported ranging from deadnaming and being treated as diseased, to “vilification and scaremongering by the media”, to

physical or sexual assault (Bradley, 2020, p. 8). The scaring results of the report show that 70% of respondents stated that transphobia had a direct impact on their mental health, 50% had self-harmed and more than 50% had contemplated self-harm or suicide (Bradley, 2020, p. 17).

Answering to the backlash following what *Time* magazine called “the transgender tipping point” (Steinmetz, 2014) to describe the increased visibility of transgender people in popular culture, and which gave the false illusion that the fight for transgender rights was over, Alabanza has voiced their concern that dialogue or debate around trans issues has led to framing trans lives as if they were up for debate (Pengelly, 2018), moving from the transgender tipping point, which signalled towards an achievement of equality for the trans community, to the transgender issue, which frames trans people as a problem that needs to be solved. As Shon Faye states,

[t]ypically, trans people are lumped together as ‘the transgender issue’, dismissing and erasing the complexity of trans lives, reducing them to a set of stereotypes on which various social anxieties can be brought to bear. By and large, the transgender issue is seen as a ‘toxic debate’, a ‘difficult topic’ chewed over (usually by people who are not trans themselves) on television shows, in newspaper opinion pieces and in university philosophy departments. Actual trans people are rarely to be seen.” (2021, p. xiv)

The main problem behind the rhetoric of reducing trans lives to a culture war is the overshadowing of the real issues facing trans people. Quoting Faye again, she states that “[t]rans people have been dehumanized, reduced to a talking point or conceptual problem: an ‘issue’ to be discussed and debated endlessly. It turns out that when the media want to talk about trans issues, it means they want to talk about *their* issues with *us*, not the challenges *facing us*” (Faye, 2021, p. 9). Together with this, the illusion of a ‘transgender tipping point’, has both increased trans visibility but also reduced it to a very particular and palatable trans experience, in particular, to trans narratives that

reinforce the gender binary and trans people who fit within normative or stereotypical forms of masculinity and femininity, leaving out nonbinary people and other gender non-conforming people. This results in what Ace Lehner has identified as “sediment[ing] a type of ‘transnormativity’ that mainstream culture is invested in celebrating” (Lehner, 2021, p. 42). In short, trans visibility has not led to trans acceptance.

In the British context, the framing of trans lives as an issue has left little space for a public discussion of the real issues facing trans people. Amongst these, some of the more pressing are the bullying and exclusion faced by trans children or the reluctance trans children feel of disclosing their gender identity at home for fear of violence or destitution. Trans people suffering from domestic abuse or finding themselves in a situation of homelessness do not have services that provide for their special needs as both domestic abuse services and homeless shelters are heavily gendered. In most cases, trans people have to endure further violence in the forms of homophobia and/or transphobia as a result of the lack of services that cater to their specific needs. In the particular case of domestic abuse, as Shon Faye states, trans people may face specific forms of abuse related to their identity,

[p]erpetrators might withhold medication or prevent treatment related to the victim’s transition, refuse to use correct pronouns and prevent the victim from telling other people about their trans history or identity, or convince their partner that nobody would believe them about the abuse because they are trans. (2021, pp. 55-56)

Adding to that, elderly trans people face discrimination in care services, which is just another aspect of the ignorance of the specific healthcare challenges faced by trans people other than transitioning, including the lack of specific services for trans sexual health, fertility or mental health. Finally, trans people are at higher risk of poverty and unemployment, as well as at higher risk of being attacked.

As Sara Ahmed highlights, ‘gender critical’ feminists enact a form of harassment that is made invisible by rhetorically being framed as a debate (2021).⁸³ One of the most direct consequences of the constant harassment of trans people in the media is that it invites abuse from the public (Faye, 2021, p. 4). It is this invitation that leads to transphobic attacks such as the one suffered by Travis Alabanza, which, as I discussed in the next section, results in what we can identify as gender terror.

4.2.3. Gender Terror

4.2.3.1. Gender Critical Discourses and Trans-Exclusionary Politics

One of the consequences of the media coverage of trans issues in Britain has been the disproportionate amplification of ‘gender critical’ discourses evidencing how the emergence of this conservative narrative coincides with the increase of anti-trans rhetoric across both Western countries in general and in the UK in particular. In that sense, I find particularly important to highlight Sarah Ahmed’s view that sustains that ‘gender critical’ feminism – a movement she accurately identifies as indeed anti-feminist – is a part of a conservative wave that aims to “restore racial as well as gendered hierarchies by demonizing those who question them” (2021). Following this view, Sarah Franklin establishes a connection between ‘gender critical’ feminists in the UK and Brexit, by coining the term “feminist Brexiteers” (2022, p. 136S). According to Franklin, the logics of saving the nation behind the Brexit campaign were grounded in “fictional accounts of ‘controlling borders’ that sutured together traditional narratives about gender, race and reproduction in an attempt to goad voters into ‘rescuing’ the nation from degeneration and decline” (Franklin, 2022, p. 133S). Based on that, Franklin sustains that ‘gender critical’ discourses are “proxy wars” by which gender becomes a threat to established forms of social order that sustain the nation, such as

⁸³ Following Ahmed, I will place ‘gender critical’ within quotation marks to render visible how “most of the most critical work on sex and gender within the academy is happening in the very spaces, Gender Studies, Queer Studies and Transgender Studies, many ‘gender critical’ feminists oppose” (Ahmed, 2021).

heteronormativity (ibid.). This discourse, which Franklin locates within alt-right and ethno-nationalist circles has also found its way within self-proclaimed Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) who “equate ‘gender ideology’ with a ‘war on women’” (ibid.), contributing to the creation of “gender terror” defined by Franklin as “a fear that something crucial to the very existence of ‘women’ is being taken away, endangering all women and even undermining the basis of the entire social order by denying the truth of biology, evolution and nature” (Franklin, 2022, p. 136S). One of the first to speak about gender terror(ism) was performance artist and gender theorist Kate Bornstein. Initially used to refer to people who challenge the hegemonic gender binary, that is, people who were “terrorizing the structure of gender itself” (2006, p. 236), she quickly re-defined the term and sustained that:

gender terrorists are not the drag queens, the butch dykes, the men on roller skates dressed as nuns. Gender terrorists are not the female to male transsexual who’s learning to look people in the eye while he walks down the street. Gender terrorists are not the leather daddies or back-seat Betties. Gender terrorists are not the married men, shivering in the dark as they slip on their wives’ panties. Gender terrorists are those who [...] bang their heads against a gender system which is real and natural; and who then use gender to terrorize the rest of us. These are the real terrorists: the Gender Defenders. (2006, p. 236)

As seen in the quote, Bornstein defines the Gender Defenders as those who protect the existing gender binary even if that perpetuates a system of violence sustained by (cis) male privilege (2006, p. 237).⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Note that Bornstein does not use the terms cis/cisgender in her text, quoted here in the version available in *The Transgender Studies Reader* (Stryker & Whittle, 2006) which was originally published in her book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (1994). Readers of the text might also notice how she uses both transgender and transsexual, a dichotomy that is hardly in use nowadays in trans circles. This is evidence of how quickly the terminology to refer to trans people and trans-related activism and theory has evolved in the last thirty years. In that sense, it is quite possible that some of the terminology in use in this thesis will become shortly outdated by new forms to refer to gender variance.

A direct reference to how the gender system upheld by Gender Defenders is a form of violence can be found at the beginning of *Burgers*. Right after Alabanza has shared the moment of harassment that gave origin to the show, they delve into a soliloquy about the material characteristics of burgers: “the bun, the beef, the patty [...] Lettuce, green. Tomatoes, sliced. I guess red. Cheese, thin. Mayo over the top. Onions, maybe. Some other garnish” (2018a, p. 10). Shortly after the exploration and deconstruction of the different elements that constitute the burger, they present a choice to the audience: “HOT DOG OR BURGER, LOVE?” (2018a, p. 11), which will be repeated several times, so that different members of the audience, which Alabanza addresses directly, can answer. As Helen Palmer has suggested in her linguistic analysis of the play as an iterative process of deconstruction and repetition, “in the context of binary gender presuppositions and the verbal and physical violence of discrimination, these food objects are placed in opposition to one another, hyper-saturated in anatomical symbolism which is not lost on the predominantly queer presenting audience” (2020, p. 46). These two fast food elements, which are materially constituted of roughly the same elements in different shapes and sizes are “crude material signifiers demonstrating the utter arbitrariness of gender divisions” (2020, p. 47), an arbitrariness that Alabanza strongly relates to violence when, moments later, they say: “HOT DOG OR BURGER? Die quietly or die loudly? Splitting things up into two arbitrary categories has never worked ever since the beginning of time” (2018a, p. 13). There is extreme violence encapsulated in the question ‘Die quietly or die loudly?’. The enquiry refers to the quiet invisibility that eludes the multiple forms of violence faced by trans people, as well as to the public harassment that results from the increased visibility consequence of living openly as a gender non-conforming person in a heteropatriarchal cisgender system.

The ongoing metaphor that establishes a correlative between food and the gender system continues with a discussion on the box the burger they are cooking on stage must be placed in. Once Alabanza has invited a cisgender white man to help them

make the burger mostly by reading a set of instructions, we witness the following interaction:

MAN Travis, before you can make the burger, it is important you decide the type of box the burger must go in.

TRAVIS Type of box? Hold on, I thought I'd start cooking now, what do you mean?

MAN Travis, before you can make the burger, it is important you decide the type of box the burger must go in.

TRAVIS I'm sorry. But... how do I pick a box for something that isn't even made yet? That doesn't seem right.

MAN Travis, before you can make the burger, it is important you decide the type of box the burger must go in.

(2018a, pp. 21–22)

As Palmer sustained in relation to the metaphor of the hot dog and the burger, here too the comment that Alabanza is trying to make will be quite self-evident for the queer audience. However, and perhaps as a result of not presupposing everyone's familiarity with the premise that sustains the gender system is violent, Alabanza has the following interaction with the man helping him cook, who provides his own answers to each of the questions: "What came first? The Burger or the Box for the Burger? Man or Woman. Or the cages made for man or woman. Or the person in charge of capturing the person free from man or woman. Gender or violence? That last one was the same thing" (2018a, p. 23). With these words, Alabanza alludes not only to the system upheld by the Gender Defenders – 'the cages made for man or woman' – but also, and quite importantly, to the necessity of policing the people living under that system – 'the person in charge of capturing the person free from man or woman' – which is ultimately what the Gender Defenders do by using gender to terrorize.

Throughout the play, Alabanza will record several other incidents of harassment they have faced while being in public. These include incidents in public transport, when a man looking at them inside a carriage in the Victoria Line cried out “What the fuck are you?” or another man followed them “breathing down [their] neck” at the Dalston Overground station (2018a, p. 39); being laughed at in a shopping mall by schoolgirls or having a taxi driver refuse to pick them up after telling them they are “disgusting” (Alabanza, 2018a, p. 40). Similar experiences are documented in the vox pops recorded by the Hackney Showroom, with participants stating “I don’t necessarily feel safe outside” (Hackney Showroom, 2018c); “When I go outside, I feel quite wrong. I feel that I have a body that is not the one that I would have wanted. But at the same time, I can’t do much to change it. That’s how I feel, anyway” (Hackney Showroom, 2018e); or sharing painful common experiences such as the following:

How do I feel outside? I feel speculated about. I feel stared at. I don’t feel anonymous as much as I want to. I think if I wanted to bring attention to myself that would be fine, and sometimes I do, but that’s my choice and I want it to be my choice and it’s not my choice, so I think that’s the thing that I find more difficult about my presentation and my gender. And outside means I need to use a bathroom and that’s incredibly difficult. There is probably nothing as shameful as being in a female bathroom and having a mother hold her child as if she’s protecting that child from me. Or having people literally come up to me and say, “you shouldn’t be in here, you’re a man” and me having to open up my jacket or push up my breasts [they demonstrate it]. It’s a right that feels that is pushed upon me or taken away from me, should I say. I shouldn’t have to justify my own presence in somewhere where all I want to do is take a wee, you know. (Hackney Showroom, 2018d)

In the British context, Gender Defenders are what Franklin has denominated feminist Brexiteers. The main strategy to disseminate gender terror used by British anti-trans feminists, or feminist Brexiteers, is the defence of the sacredness of women’s

toilets to protect women from male violence in public spaces.⁸⁵ Franklin equates this obsession with the borders of the toilet to the policing of the nation's borders promoted by Brexit. In short, she establishes a correlation by which “[p]romising to protect the sanctity of the female toilet as the guarantor of gendered justice is, like the Brexiteer’s promise to save the United Kingdom from economic ruin, a symptom of reactionary panic and confusion” (2022, p. 137S). Yet, as she reminds us, “[t]he idea that the real truth of gender is under threat is how gender not only becomes a proxy for the safety of the body politic but the essentialist signature of carceral genderism – or the policing of gender boundaries” (ibid.). However, what ‘gender critical’ feminists fail to recognize is how this policing of gender boundaries that controls the spaces available for trans people and prevent them from accessing women-only spaces puts trans bodies at greater risk of harassment and violence.

The policing of trans people in public space is not only reduced to toilets. In November 2017 Alabanza was prevented to use a women’s changing room in a Topshop store in Manchester despite the fact that the retailer had supposedly changed their changing room policy to gender neutral a few months prior to the incident. Alabanza subsequently tweeted about the incident, and even if this led to Topshop eventually changing their changing room policy, it also led to the artist facing a disproportionate amount of online abuse, precipitating the publication of an article in *The Times* where Janice Turner made a connection between Alabanza’s incident, trans rights and child abuse (Brinkhurst-Cuff, 2017). As Alabanza recalls in *Burgerz*:

⁸⁵ Alabanza has responded to this policing of female bathrooms with the theatre play *Overflow*, which opened on 8 December 2020 at the Bush Theatre, London. After a short run the play was cancelled due to London moving into Tier 3 restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic but was recorded and streamed worldwide in January 2021. The play reopened at the Bush on the 31st of August 2021 for another run. Directed by Debbie Hannah and performed by Reece Lyons, *Overflow* explores the safety of trans people in public toilets. Through a story about clubbing, sisterhood and friendship, the play highlights how the discussion over violence in public spaces has obliterated the danger trans people in general, and trans women in particular, experience in places such as club toilets.

November 11th. ‘*Children sacrificed to appease trans lobby*’, an article written by Janice Turner in the *Times*. I was the subject of that article. [...] There were photos of me in every major newspaper, misgendering me, pulling apart my appearance, telling me I was an imposter; people were tweeting at me saying they wanted me to die thousands of times a day; in the street people would come up to me and call me a freak; a group of mums told the theatre I was working in at the time that I should lose my job (2018a, p. 42)

Based on the trope of the necessity to protect children, Turner’s article reproduced two prevalent transphobic (and generally queerphobic) stereotypes, firstly, that trans people in general, and transfeminine people in particular are sexual predators, and secondly, that trans people are endangering children. This in turn led to an increase in the harassment experienced by trans and gender non-conforming people in public space, contributing to trans people’s experiences of terror and unsafety in public.

4.2.3.2. Transmisogynoir as Terror

One specific form of gender terror is ‘transmisogynoir’, a term that I will use to highlight the intersection of misogyny, transphobia, racism and violence experienced by transfeminine black bodies.⁸⁶ The term ‘transmisogyny’ was coined by Julia Serano to define the mockery and violence experienced by trans people not just for their gender expression, but for their particular expressions of femininity (2007, p. 11). It developed from Serano and Bailey’s misogynoir discussed in the previous chapter and was first used in an academic paper by Aimee Wodda and Vanessa R. Panfil (Wodda & Panfil,

⁸⁶ The Transgender Europe project “Transgender Versus Transphobia Worldwide” released a report indicating that 375 trans people had been murdered around the world in 2021, making it the deadliest year for trans and gender non-conforming people since data has been gathered. The data shows that 96% were transfeminine people, the majority of which were Black. As the authors of the report point to, “data indicate a worrying trend when it comes to the intersections of misogyny, racism, xenophobia, and hate towards sex workers, with the majority of victims being Black and migrant trans women of colour, and trans sex workers” (TGEU, 2021).

2015, p. 931) to refer to the specific forms of violence experienced by transfeminine black bodies.⁸⁷

My understanding of transmisogynoir as a specific form of terror develops from both, Bornstein's definition of gender terror previously presented and the theory of sexual terror proposed by Nerea Barjola in her text *Microfísica Sexista del Poder: El Caso Alcàsser y la Construcción del Terror Sexual* ('Sexist Microphysics of Power: The Alcàsser Case and the Construction of Sexual Terror') (2019). In this text, Barjola revisits the Alcàsser case, one of the most shocking cases of violence against women in Spain's recent history, and examines how the complicit role of the media in the treatment of the case contributed towards exerting another form of violence and disseminating terror against feminised bodies.⁸⁸ In particular, Barjola's feminist approach shows how the painstaking media coverage was responsible for the propagation of a discourse that terrorized and punished women who would defy the norm that confines them within the domestic space and instead claim their bodily autonomy. This resulted in what she has called "the discipline of sexual terror" (2019, p. 29), which she defines as a punitive measure implemented by society and disseminated by the media (2019, p. 33).⁸⁹ It is through the lens of bodily autonomy that we can find a link between Barjola's feminist reading of sexual terror and a specific form of terror faced by trans people, especially black transfeminine people. In relation to this, Shon Faye has explored the main discourses surrounding bodily autonomy for trans people and has established a connection between two prevalent narratives linked to it: transition regret and abortion regret (Faye, 2021, p. 100). As she states, both the British media and the conservative voices they privilege constantly refer to particular examples of individuals who have

⁸⁷ Wodda and Panfil credit Keir Bristol for the first usage of the term in an entry published on the website *The Visibility Project* (<https://thevisibilityproject.com/>). However, the specific entry is no longer available. Despite the untraceable origin, the term 'transmisogynoir' is finding its place within black trans studies. For recent uses of the term see Ellison & Hoffman, 2019 and Whitley, 2022.

⁸⁸ The Alcàsser crime took place on November 13th 1992, when the three young women Míriam García, Antonia Gómez and Desirée Hernández were kidnapped, tortured, raped and murdered after hitchhiking to get to a nightclub.

⁸⁹ All translations from Barjola's text are mine unless otherwise indicated.

expressed regret either for transitioning or for having an abortion. While these particular individual experiences are not representative of the vast majority of trans individuals who wish to medically transition, of women, trans men or nonbinary people who have or might want to have an abortion, they are used as principles to prevent abortion access or examples to justify that transition should be avoided. What these examples illustrate is that bodily autonomy is denied to those on the margins of the white cis-masculine norm. Those who challenge this norm and exert or claim their bodily autonomy become both a source of terror and become in turn terrorized.

A parallelism can be established between the media coverage of the Alcàsser case and that of crimes against Black trans women in the UK. One such example is the coverage of Naomi Hersi's death, a black transgender woman killed in London on the 18th March 2018, which the LGBTQ+ organization Stonewall deemed a disgrace.⁹⁰ As they reported, "how the media treat hate crimes and violence against trans people is no doubt a contributing factor to how willing trans people are to talk about the violence they face" (Stonewall, 2018). In the case of Naomi Hersi, the report of her murder, which included the broadcast of the special episode "The Body in the Bathroom: The Murder of Naomi Hersi" in the true crime documentary series *Murdered By*, featured misgendering, reverting to her deadname and the display of pictures of her before transitioning; an overt representation of the cruel bodily violence to which she was subjected, and severe victim-blaming based on the fact that Hersi had met her murderer, as reported by the killer, in a swingers website, and that she was killed after what was reported as a chemsex session.⁹¹ The sensationalist treatment of the murder in some media outlets, was coupled with deadening silence in other press outlets, such as *The Times*, which regularly feature "fearmongering articles against trans people"

⁹⁰ Stonewall is the biggest non-profit organization campaigning for the rights and the equality of LGBTQ+ people in the UK. Named after the 1969 Stonewall Riots, the organization was founded in 1989 to fight against Section 28.

⁹¹ 'Deadname' refers to the name a trans person was given at birth and is no longer used by them after their transition. The term 'swinger' refers to a person who engages in consensual group sex or in the consensual exchange of sexual partners. 'Chemsex' refers to the use of recreational drugs before and during a sexual encounter to facilitate and prolong the sexual experience.

(Alabanza, 2018b). Both the hyper-visible disgraceful treatment of her death by sensationalist outlets, and the silence, are part of the multiple forms of violence faced by black transfeminine people which is grounded in both, transphobia and racism. As Alabanza, writing on Hersi's death, said:

We must be clear that transphobia and violence perpetrated against trans people can never be separated from racism. The disposability of black bodies, especially those blended with transness, creates a lack of mourning in the face of our fatality: an expectation rather than a shock. Those that face anti-blackness and transmisogyny are often discarded, not just in wider culture but also within our community. (2018b)

Following Barjola's theories, we could say that in the treatment of Hersi's death – especially if we consider the sensationalist media and the inclusion of the case in a true crime series –the media had an extremely important role in the production and circulation of gender terror.

What is particularly interesting in Barjola's proposal is the relationship she establishes between the sexual terror narrative of the Alcàsser case vis-à-vis the increased activity and visibility of the feminist movement in Spain from the 1970s onwards. According to her, the politically-embodied feminist struggle that emerged during the Spanish transition to democracy after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco, and that was aimed at redefining the social and individual rights of women – amongst which their sexual freedom – was countered, amongst others, by the effects of the Alcàsser crime (2019, p. 62-63). In her words, “the Alcàsser crime and its resolution featured the necessary elements to disrupt all the routes opened by the Feminist Movement. The narrative had to be of significant magnitude to stop the advances that had achieved new levels of freedom since the 1980s” (2019, p. 80). Following Barjola, I want to suggest that the treatment of transgender violence in the British media, which contributes to disseminate gender terror, results from the increased visibility of trans

people discussed in the previous section, and is part of the general efforts to counter the advances in transgender rights. In particular, in relation to the previously discussed context surrounding the public consultation to reform the Gender Recognition Act.

Together with this, the advent of the #BlackLivesMatter movement discussed in the previous chapter, puts increased pressure upon black transfeminine people. A especially on the impoverished population. Reflecting upon this in the play, Alabanza says:

You know in these hate crime adverts they always advise the poor trans person to call the police, and I always want to ask back, ‘Why would we want to bring more trouble to our door?’ And then I remember that we aren’t all in the same house... are we? (2018a, p. 31-32)

The intersection of gender and race and the awareness of transmisogynoir are further discussed in *Burgerz* during the conversations Alabanza has with the man cooking the burger, which are only partially scripted. Together with the instructions the man gives and receives, Alabanza asks him a series of questions, some of which appear in the printed text – such as “When was the last time you cried? What does it feel to be a man? Are you scared of being outside?” (2018a, p. 37) – while others change depending on the answers provided and whoever is on stage that day, including “Do you think rooms get tense when race gets brought up?” (Parsons, 2019). This particular question was also brought up on the date I watched the performance. The white man on stage naively and cluelessly answered “no”, which provoked a series of sneers, puffs, uncomfortable chair shriveling and scornful laughter in the audience. As Alabanza reveals, their experience is vastly different from that of the white man on stage:

I can often feel a room become heavier as soon as race is brought up. A sticky, dense feeling where the room becomes... almost hotter. The temperature kind of rises and I feel we suddenly have less space. Steam always rises to the top. Of

course, I do not feel this shift or the rise in heat... the steam; some of you do not either, because for us it never left. (Alabanza, 2018a, p. 31)

The sticky, dense feeling Alabanza recalls reverberates with Sara Ahmed's notion of sticky emotions and their relationship to fear and disgust which in *Burgerz* will be linked to the rooms Alabanza enters, but as I will discuss later in the chapter, also to the burger. As per Ahmed, stickiness involves a transference of affect between objects which depends on "histories of contact that have already impressed upon the surface of the object" (2004, p. 90); in the context of the play, these histories of contact are linked to the colonial legacies of gender and race.

4.2.3.3. Colonial Legacies of Gender and Race

A significant point raised by Alabanza during the play is how gender identity and gender expression are shaped by colonial histories and legacies. As Nigerian scholar Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí outlines, with the advent of modernity – fuelled by the colonial project – racial and gender categories emerged “as two fundamental axes along which people were exploited and societies stratified” (2002, p. 1). This crucially resonates with Maria Lugones's concept of the colonality of gender, according to which, together with race, colonialism introduced “gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing” (2007, p. 187).⁹² This is manifested not only in the organization of society according to gender paradigms which regulate the distribution of productive and reproductive work, but also in the erasure of any form of gender variance that does not fit within the parameters of what the colonial gender system deems masculine and/or feminine. Alabanza touches upon it in the play when they state: “[i]t's not just that before colonisation gender non-conformity existed in different forms, it's that

⁹² Lugones's theorizations on the colonality of gender expand on Anibal Quijano's concept of the colonality of power, which describes the ways in which European colonialism introduced social classifications of the population based on the idea of race. For a full appraisal of the colonality of power theory see Quijano, 2000.

colonisation and race continue to affect how gender continues to be formed” (2018a, p. 33), signalling at how the ways in which gender is understood is a legacy of colonialism.

Further expanding on the colonial legacies of race and gender through the specific lens of queer studies, Rahul Rao concludes that both the colonial subject and the queer subject are out of time (2020, p. 1). While temporality in relation to *Burgerz* will be examined later in the chapter, Rao’s argument is relevant here for the important task of mapping the particular colonial legacies of gender and race. Based on his readings of the work of Johannes Fabian on imperialism and Neville Hoad on sexuality, Rao sustains that imperialism consists in “the denial that all human societies are of the same age”, while similarly, the queer subject is presented in early studies of sexuality, psychoanalysis and anthropology as “an instance of arrested development, retardation, degeneracy, and decadence” (2020, p. 1). What both Rao and Lugones point at, which Alabanza highlights in their play, is that racialized and gender non-conforming subjects are both manifestations of the colonial Other, a discursive formation that is still prevalent, as it was enforced upon colonized subjects to the point that it has been adopted and reproduced by native colonial elites. As Rao further highlights:

Among the most profound effects of colonial governmentality was a tendency on the part of native modernising elites to increasingly understand their “selfhood” and bodies, their relationship with the environment, health and illness in the same terms as their colonisers, in part by privileging biomedical discourses over local idioms and practices. In seeking to win recognition for a diversity of sexual identities to which individual selves might have access, contemporary LGBT activism is both enabled by and further entrenches ontologies of personhood originally forged in conditions of colonial modernity. (Rao, 2020)

Yet, Alabanza attempts to counter the worldview that understands gender only within the parameters of said colonial discourses. As they start to make the burger with the

man from the audience, and the latter insists on the necessity to decide what kind of box will the burger be placed in, Alabanza says:

It seems silly to hide in the very things that try to contain you. Two thousand years ago there were Gods that looked like me. And maybe you. Worshipped in their plurality. Existing. Not cast aside. Castrated. Cast away. But seen in their plurality as a strength, not a hindrance. (2018a, p. 26)

By referring to historical and mostly non-Western gender non-conforming identities such as the Hijra, the Bakla, the Kathoey, Two Spirit, Quariwarmi or the Femminiello (2018a, p. 26), Alabanza enacts an intervention in the gender binary discourse, as well as in the current rhetoric that presents transness as something new.⁹³ As Susan Stryker says “[t]here is rhetorical power in saying trans has a history, and given the fascination with trans-identified people moving successfully into mainstream media production, it’s crucial that we assert that history” (Lehner, 2021, p. 41).⁹⁴ Thus, Alabanza’s incorporation of these figures simultaneously highlights and renders visible the Eurocentric lens through which gender is examined and establishes a genealogy of multiple gender non-conforming identities.

The genealogy drafted by Alabanza contributes towards their project of archiving trans lives, in this case, by rendering visible the history of gender non-conformity. After the previously analysed monologue where they recall a series of violent encounters and instances of harassment suffered in public space, Travis recalls the following dream:

⁹³ Sometimes referred to as ‘third genders’, these terms refer to people who, from a Western perspective, we would identify as of nonbinary gender expression, in Hindu society (Hijra), the Philippines (Bakla), Thailand (Kathoey), Indigenous North American communities (Two Spirit), Perú (Quariwarmi) and Naples, Italy (Femminiello).

⁹⁴ In light with what is discussed in this section, it is important to note that the overarching reach of the term trans as an umbrella term to define experiences of gender non-conformity has been criticized by gender non-conforming activists from former colonized territories as a Eurocentric term that homogenizes experiences of gender dissidence and erases non-Eurocentric experiences. In relation to this see Emezi, 2018 and Whitehead, 2018. I am indebted to Dr. Maria Grau for drawing my attention to the work of Joshua Whitehead and for closely reading this section with her postcolonial gaze.

And I'm floating next to my ancestors in the Philippines. The Baklas. And we are both floating in a time before we were punished. Floating in and out of genders, the Bakla turns to me and speaks in their own tongue. 'We have been creating these words long before they were shouted at us.' (2018a, pp. 48–49)

Shortly afterwards, their dream places them in the finger of a Femminiello, to whom Travis surprisingly asks how they can hold him with just one finger. To that, the Femminiello answers: "Darling, we have held so much more for centuries. We were not always treated like dirt, we were once seen as blessed" (Alabanza, 2018a, p. 49). The dream continues with the appearance of a Hijra named Jaan, who lovingly tucks Travis into bed, bringing them the comfort and security they lack as a trans person in public space. The dream finishes with these words, which are worth quoting at length:

'Isolation is the best tactic of oppression. But I need you to open your eyes, your ears, your heart, and remember that we have been here too. You are not new, you are not the only one, the streets will make you feel like there is no one else, but remind yourself of the lands before they were walked on.' Jaan blew out the candle, as the Femminiello closed the curtains, and the group of Baklas gently pushed me back down to the ground. I opened my eyes to hear you say faggot, and remembered that there was more than this moment. (2018a, p. 51)

With this dream, Alabanza carves a space of security not only for themselves, but for other trans and gender non-conforming people. This space is built upon dismantling colonial gender binaries, which the Hijra voices by recalling "When they first came over here, said 'male or female' and we said 'no'. They called us a criminal tribe" (Alabanza, 2018a, p. 50). Concurrently, the safe space also emerges with the tracing and re-tracing of trans histories, exemplified by the figures of the Bakra, the Femminiello and the Hijra, making evident that gender non-conforming identities predate the very same discourse that upholds and sustains the gender binary.

As introduced in the previous section, Alabanza's remarks on the entanglements between gender and race are further explored by paying special attention to the specific relationships between transness and blackness in the context of the colonial histories that have shaped both categories. Going back to their own experiences as a Black-mixed trans person, they recollect: "[t]he third time I met someone online to have sex he left because he said, 'I thought you'd be more masculine because you're Black'" (Alabanza, 2018a, p. 32). With this, Alabanza directs our attention to the multiple ways in which black bodies are gendered and (hyper)sexualized by a predominantly white gaze. In fact, moments later they will recall: "To think it is only trans people that are misgendered is the whitest way to think about bodies. Black bodies have known what it means to be de-gendered, hyper-gendered, misgendered since the beginning of your slavery" (Alabanza, 2018a, p. 33). Alabanza's argument crucially resonates with the constructs of black gender and sexuality explored in E. Patrick Johnson's edited volume *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (2016). By focusing on sex, pornography, theatre, social media, film or the black diaspora, the authors of the volume pinpoint the many ways in which black bodies have been gendered and sexualized as a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In particular, I wish to suggest that Alabanza's comment, and their focus on gender non-conformity, expands on the affirmation that "black masculinity and femininity is always already perceived as queer" (Ziegler, 2016, p. 204). As Kortney Ziegler further unpacks, "black women have always been perceived as embodying 'masculine' qualities due to discourses of white racism that have positioned them as aggressive, dominant, overbearing, sexually promiscuous while at the same time sexually undesirable" (Ziegler, 2016), while black men have been both traditionally hypersexualized and emasculated.

The subversiveness of Alabanza's gender embodiment further 'queers' binary constructs of (Black) masculinity and femininity; nonetheless, their gender embodiment is still tied to colonial legacies. This establishes a correlation between *Burgerz* and the reading of the relationships between blackness and transness proposed by C. Riley

Snorton, who foregrounds how “within the rubrics of racialized gender” both black and trans lives matter (2017, p. x). He uses the concept of racialized gender – which needs to be understood as the simultaneous interactions of race and gender – to centre how biopolitical and necropolitical orders have been in place to similarly regulate both black and trans lives (2017, p. ix). In particular, he observes that black and trans have been brought “into the same frame by the various ways they have been constituted as fungible, thingified, and interchangeable, particularly within the logics of the transatlantic exchange” (2017, p. 8). Taking this on board, I want to conclude this section by suggesting that Snorton’s approach can help us establish a connection between forms of racial terror discussed in the previous chapter, and forms of gender terror, both of which, as has been seen, are present in Alabanza’s play.

4.2.4. Form: Food and/as the Archive

The central dramatic action in *Burgerz* is the act of cooking a burger. Writing about their own play in the foreword of the published play text, Alabanza says:

Burgerz has become an emblem for so many other incidents, deaths, acts of violence and harm, that the trans and gender non-conforming community have to face every single day. *Burgerz*, for me, is about archiving the pain in our reality. It is about complicating the narrative. It is about writing down that these things exist, and that we cannot keep pretending they do not. (2018a, unnumbered)

In relation to these words, and to the ways food features in the play, this section analyses the ways in which the use of food in the play constitutes a central element that contributes to and simultaneously constitutes the archive Alabanza is trying to create.

4.2.4.1. *Tranz Talkz: Aesthetics of Care and the Archive as a Queer Space*

As mentioned in the introduction to the chapter, together with devising the play, Alabanza conducted *Tranz Talkz*, a series of encounters around the country where they had dinner with trans and gender non-conforming people. In these encounters, the participants ate burgers and chips and shared life experiences linked to their experiences of being trans.⁹⁵ This series of events was aimed towards building an archive with recollections based on the embodied knowledge on what it is like to be trans and gender non-conforming in public space in the UK. Speaking about these series of talks, Alabanza said

I sat around a table with strangers, bonded by our transness, eating burgers and chips and asking them questions about their life. Every single person said they were anxious outside. Most said they edit themselves before they leave the door. Almost all said they were harassed. (2018a, unnumbered)

An interesting point Alabanza makes is that the statistics about trans experience in public space – they refer in particular to the statistics available from Stonewall – only focus on examples of incidents, but do not take into consideration everything that happens before these incidents take place (Alabanza 2018b, 43’13”). One of the central themes of the conversations relates to Ace Lehner’s affirmation that sustains that “[t]rans as an identity is not assigned to us by how we look; instead it is something we self-proclaim” (2021, p. 38). A question of visibility emerges with this statement, one that is central to the discussions that took place during *Tranz Talkz* and one that is

⁹⁵ *Tranz Talkz* took place in the following venues: *Tranz Talkz* Coventry, Belgrade Theatre, 20 September 2018; *Tranz Talkz* London, Hackney Showroom, 4 October 2018; *Tranz Talkz* Manchester, Royal Exchange, 13 November 2018; *Tranz Talkz* Oxford, North Wall at the Jericho Tower, 20 November 2018; *Tranz Talkz Cambridge*, Cambridge Junction, 21 November 2018. These were sound recorded in order to be archived at the LGBTQ+ Archive at the Bishopsgate Institute. At the time of writing this thesis, the material has not yet been donated to the archive. Recordings from two of the talks were made available online via Soundcloud. The references I will be making throughout the chapter come from these recordings, which can be accessed here: <https://soundcloud.com/user-836205497> as well as the recordings available at the Hackney Showroom to which I had access, including an audio file from a session in Brighton which is not announced in the official website of the event. The audio recordings formed part of the BURGERZ exhibition that ran from 23 October to 3 November 2018 at the Hackney Showroom.

indeed a fundamental and complex experience of trans existence. Increased visibility for trans people has also resulted in an important backlash in the context of the UK. As Alabanza has more recently explained,

About seven or eight years ago, the UK tried to garner some of the momentum of the increase in trans visibility in the States, and we experienced a well-orchestrated backlash in media. TERFs and massive, anti-trans rhetoric shut down many cultural producers, and countless press outlets targeted numerous trans artists without massive platforms. This happened even to artists who were doing shows for just sixty people. (Lehner, 2021, p. 42)

In the case of Alabanza, increased visibility led to danger. In that regard, in a round table that took place after the production of *Burgers* and *Tranz Talks* they said

Now I'm in a period of disembodiment. I'm thinking about how my practice can be quieter, and that feels powerful too. I used to find power in visibility, but now I'm finding power in invisibility. I wonder how I can make art without being spectacularized and how I can write without my narrative in there. (Lehner, 2021, p. 45)

A similar preoccupation was expressed by the artists featured in *Burgers and Chips with Travis Alabanza* (2022a). What transpires from this particular clip, where the dinner guests are fellow artists, is an analogous worry with how the theatre industry fails to properly hold trans artists, who manifest they feel tokenized, unsafe, sexualized and consumed.

During the dinner discussions held in different theatres, the starting point and first theme Alabanza invites the participants to talk about is how they feel when they go outside. In that regard, many of the answers point to the conundrum of feeling both hyper-visible as a gender non-conforming person vulnerable to violence, and at the same time invisible in regard to their gender expression; an invisibility which results in frequent misgendering. Ultimately, questions of visibility in relation to the trans

experience are intrinsically tied to passing and/or to being clocked, which reveals how trans people are severely cross-examined according to cisgender parameters of gender expression.⁹⁶ The hyper-visibility they describe leads to most participants affirming that in order to not experience harassment they edit themselves before going outside, to present more normative, or more in accordance to the gender they were assigned at birth, or the gender people assume from their expression. This editing can take the form of choosing different clothes to the ones they would wear to be less visible, modifying the way they walk, or arching their backs to take less space. In the Coventry session, someone who describes themselves as an intruder, in the sense that they do not identify as trans, raises the question of whether trans people edit themselves to satisfy the others, and/or to what extent is that satisfaction what leads to feeling less harassed, to which Alabanza answers that for them, the distinction between what is a choice for themselves and what is a strategy so they will not get hurt is not clear (Alabanza, 2018d, 59'30").

One particularly jarring example is that of a transmasculine person who explains they edit their voice to sound more masculine even if the recurring practice results in physical pain, because it makes them feel less dysphoric. [Coventry, 26' 05"]. What this particular example reveals is that trans people's experiences are traversed by pain and sacrifice. Conspicuously, experiences of pain "shatter language and communication" revealing "a connection between the over-representation of pain and its unrepresentability" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 22). Despite this difficulty to fully represent pain, Ahmed claims that "pain involves the attribution of meaning through experience, as well as associations between different kinds of negative or aversive feelings" (2004, p. 23). As one participant succinctly explains:

I've written down that I feel quite overwhelmed in the outside world [...] it causes me a sense of terror and panic, and because I feel that's abnormal, it

⁹⁶ Gender passing refers to a person being perceived as belonging to a gender identity different to the one they were assigned at birth. Being clocked refers to a trans person being recognized as trans.

makes me feel really lonely as well [...] When it comes to harassment, I have experienced it because of my transness and definitely because of my race. If I become more extroverted in the way that I present as trans, I worry that people will react to me as aggressively as they have when it comes to my race. (Alabanza, 2018c 24'42'')

In connection to that, participants in the dinner discussions express that being outside makes them feel lonely, anxious, nervous, overwhelmed and/or vulnerable, a series of feelings that contribute to a feeling of pain, and to an overall experience of terror.

Throughout the dinners Alabanza invites the participants to not only be conscious about their voices, but also about whose voices have been archived and whose voices have not. The event starts with a round of names and pronouns, where participants are invited to share any other information related to their gender variance experience or their reasons to participate in the event with the room, followed by the whole group responding to the person by repeating their name and thus acknowledging their presence. For the duration of the dinner, Alabanza asks questions and invites the participants to record their answers in writing or by drawing if they feel more comfortable with this medium; they also inform the participants that they are free to leave at any given moment, as this is a form of taking a stand, move around the space, only listen, or be vocal.

Despite some differences in the format, I want to establish a connection here between *Tranz Talkz* and Split Britches's *The Long Table*, a theatrical format conceived by Lois Weaver in 2003.⁹⁷ This project has been described by the artist as

⁹⁷ Split Britches is a lesbian feminist theatre company founded in 1980 by Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver and Deb Margolin in New York. Their DIY theatre was initially performed at the WOW cafe in New York City, which had been co-founded by them. Throughout their history, Split Britches have focused on working with women and LGBTQI+ communities both nationally and internationally, one of their unique contributions to theatre being, according to Sue-Ellen Case "the cross-over between the homosexual subculture and radical feminist political theatre" (1996, p. 4). Reflections on *The Long Table*'s format come from my own participation at *In Context: Queer Stages UK* on 2 July 2017 at the National Theatre London which was part of the Queer Theatre Season organized in partnership with Pride London to mark the 50th anniversary of the partial

an alternative format for public discussion [which] was born out of my own frustration with formats of public discussion such as panel discussions where it felt like all of the expertise was on one side of the table and all the rest of us where on the other side, and I wanted to create a situation where we could honour the expertise that was in the room. (Nolan, 2015)

The Long Table, described as “generous, non-judgemental and inclusive” (Klein, 2018, p. 113) was inspired by the film *Antonia’s Line* (dir. Marleen Gorris, 1995), where a woman inherits a house in the countryside and once settled, starts to attract the eccentrics and outsiders living in the community. Her dining table becomes a central part of the film, as a gathering space that accommodates all of these eccentrics and keeps growing and becoming longer in order to fit in more people, to the point that the table needs to be moved outdoors. As Weaver explains, inspired by this, she wanted to replicate the format of the dinner conversation, but to be held in public, making of *The Long Table* “an informal format for serious conversation” (Nolan, 2015). The project, which has been growing since 2003, is open source, which means that anyone can organize a long table, and it comes with a series of guidelines available in the Split Britches’s website for anyone who wants to replicate it. There are some differences between this and *Tranz Talkz*, the most relevant one is that in Weaver’s proposal there is no moderator, and it is the table that moderates itself, whereas in *Tranz Talkz*, Alabanza moderates the conversation to a certain extent – although perhaps I would suggest their role is closer to that of a host than a moderator. Another central difference is that in *The Long Table* there is no food involved, whereas, as I will discuss later, food is a fundamental part of *Tranz Talkz*, and, evidently, *Burgerz*.

Before focusing on this difference, however, I want to highlight some further parallelisms between Weaver and Alabanza’s formats. Most importantly, I want to sustain that both proposals reclaim the domestic sphere as a political space, engaging

decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales. The event consisted on three short talks by LGBTQI+ artists Mojisola Adebayo, Neil Bartlett and Milk Presents, followed by a long table facilitated by Lois Weaver.

with and performing the feminist motto ‘the personal is political’. Firstly, both performances take place around a dinner table, traditionally a feminized space, which both *Tranz Talkz* and *The Long Table* politicize by moving them to a public realm and transforming them into an agora for political discussion. Most of the tasks they perform, especially in the case of Alabanza, belong to the realm of reproductive work which has been, and continues to be traditionally invisible.⁹⁸ However, both Weaver and Alabanza challenge the hegemonic cis-heteronormative roles assigned in the domestic space – which they are expected to fulfil as feminized people – by becoming facilitators of a political discussion in which questions of care, empathy and mutual recognition become fundamental and subvert the rules of domesticity. With that, they ultimately move care not only from the private sphere to the public realm, but also from the individualistic neoliberal understanding of care as part of the “selfcare industry – which relegates care to something we are supposed to buy for ourselves on a personal basis” (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 3) – to an understanding of care as communal.

In terms of their politics of engagement, besides contributing with their ideas and experiences, in both events participants are invited to observe, sit at the table and just be present as a form of active participation; sit at the table and write or draw in the paper tablecloths, or sit at the table and talk. Silence and the awkwardness that results from it in public discussions are welcomed and encouraged whenever they are necessary for the self-preservation and well-being of the participants. In that sense, both events understand and make visible multiple ways of being active in a conversation; ways that go beyond the simple exchange of words and encourage recognizing the Other and the multiple forms their agency can take, which are fundamental aspects of a queer feminist approach to public discussion and, in addition,

⁹⁸ My understanding of reproductive work comes from Camille Barbagallo and Silvia Federici, who define it as “the complex of activities and services that reproduce human beings as well as the commodity labour power, starting with childcare, housework, sex work and elder care, both in the form of waged and unwaged labour” (2012, p. 1)

place care at the centre. In that sense, both *The Long Table* and *Tranz Talks*'s approach to public political discussions is based on a "feminist ethics of care" (Dowling, 2021, p. 25) centred on responsibility for and towards the Other, mutual recognition and reciprocity.

In the particular case of *Tranz Talks*, the series of events is not only focused on challenging traditional formats of public political discussion, but above all, on archiving trans lives. Introducing the dinner discussion held at Brighton, Alabanza stated:

I realized there was no archive, no conversation about us existing in public space. Often [the] conversation about queerness and transness is focused on our body, is focused on our before and after, but [it is] not really about existing. So, I wanted to create these dinner conversations [...] to archive us. (2018c, 2'11")

The archive that Alabanza is building captures something both material – trans embodiment – and ephemeral – trans experience. As Ann Cvetkovich sustains, lived experiences are hard to archive, "and the cultural traces that they leave are frequently inadequate to the task of documentation" (2003, p. 9), yet, the archive has a profoundly affective power, and as Cvetkovich also reminds us, queer archives "must preserve and produce not just knowledge but feeling" (2003, p. 241), which is captured by the recordings of the conversations. Thus, these recordings become an essential way to archive "forms of affective life that have not solidified into institutions, organizations, or identities" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 9). In that sense, this resonates with Jian Neo Chen when they state that trans culture created by trans people "provides a vibrant counter-archive at a moment when the state, society, and national body continue their attack on trans people, especially trans youth, trans women and trans BIPOC" (Lehner, 2021, pp. 43-44). Taking all of this into consideration, what Alabanza is doing can be linked to what Kai M. Green and Treva Ellison describe as "tranifest". In their words,

[t]ranifesting enacts a resistance to the political and epistemic operations that would encapsulate, and capitalize for others, the fruits of our labor. It is a form of radical political and intellectual production that takes place at the crossroads of trauma, injury, and the potential for material transformation and healing. (2014, p. 223)

Considering all this, I want to suggest that this archive needs to be approached, following Jay Bernard's appraisal of the queer archive, as "an act of love", not in the sense of attraction, but in the sense of "care and curation" (Massana & Alsina, 2020, p. 231), which transforms *Tranz Talkz* into a manifestation of Alabanza's "promiscuous ethics of care" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020).⁹⁹

One of the ways tranifesting is manifested in *Tranz Talkz* is by enacting these promiscuous ethics of care. The notion of promiscuous care is developed by The Care Collective in their short text *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (Chatzidakis et al., 2020) as an alternative form of caring kinship structures beyond the nuclear family.¹⁰⁰ Their proposal is based on the idea of 'families of choice' developed by LGBTQI+ communities to refer to relationships outside the biological nuclear family, as well as the alternative infrastructures of care that queer people created to counter "the failures of both neoliberalism and hetero-patriarchal kinship in providing adequate infrastructures of care [during] the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and '90s" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 36). Taking AIDS activist theory as a starting point, in particular Douglas Crimp's essay "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic" (1987), The Care Collective suggest understanding promiscuity beyond the heteronormative paradigm that blamed the AIDS epidemic on the sexual promiscuity of gay men, and instead look at

⁹⁹ My reading of *Tranz Talkz* as a performance of care is informed by the relationship Stuart Fisher and Thompson establish between performance and care in their edited volume *Performing Care: New Perspectives on Socially Engaged Performance* (2020). For Stuart Fisher and Thompson, care is intrinsically bound to performance as "it can only be experienced as a live, embodied encounter", because it is "comprised of repeated or 'restored' practices and behaviours" and finally because it is "always situational and relational" and "has value attached to it" (2020, p. 4)

¹⁰⁰ The Care Collective was created in 2007. Members, coming from different academic disciplines, include Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg, and Lynne Segal.

promiscuity as a way to redefine intimacy, care and interdependence (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 41). To this end, an ethics of promiscuous care prompts us to extend our care-giving beyond the nuclear family, it recognizes that we all have the capacity to care and that care can be carried out by people with different kinship connections to us (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 42).

In their act of being a promiscuous care giver in the context of *Tranz Talkz*, Alabanza's project can be further analysed under the lens of James Thompson's notion of the "aesthetics of care" (2020b, p. 36, 2020a, p. 215).¹⁰¹ Thompson defines aesthetics of care, a term he develops from the feminist ethics of care,¹⁰² as an aesthetic practice that puts care at the centre, where "the intimate and interpersonal, rather than be ignored, are acknowledged as an important source of our politics" (2020b, p. 39). In his theorization, he highlights that "the aesthetics of care seeks to focus upon how the sensory and affective are realised in human relations fostered in art projects" (2020b, p. 43) and further sustains that "reciprocal acts of caring, whether formal, informal, interpersonal or collective, have a sensory, crafted quality that could be called an aesthetic" (2020a, p. 215). According to him, an aesthetic turn or focus in the practice of care, and in the context of participatory performances such as *Tranz Talkz*, has the potential of providing new ways of thinking about the work but also about "the practice and the political ambition of that practice" (2020b, p. 38). Together with the aforementioned feminist ethics of care, Thompson's suggestion to apply this to the analysis of theatrical performances is based on Nicholas Ridout's arguments that view the ethical turn as a position that "encourages the spectator to stop seeing performance as an exploration of his or her own subjectivity and, instead, to take it as an opportunity

¹⁰¹ I want to profusely thank Dr. Clara Escoda for introducing me to the concept of the aesthetics of care.

¹⁰² Thompson defines the feminist ethics of care as "an ethics based on the values central to the way humans care for each other", and sustains that the concept develops from the belief that "what might have been relegated to a private realm and therefore assumed not to be a concern for public ethics is in fact an important area of ethical concern" (Thompson, 2020b, p. 38). This view could be summarized with a transformation of the fundamental feminist belief 'the personal is political' to 'the personal is ethical', revealing how the private space "is a crucial site of ethical behavior" (ibid.).

to experience an encounter with someone else” (as cited in Thompson, 2020b, p. 41), as well as on Rancière’s approach to aesthetic practices as a form of intervention in the distribution of the sensible (Thompson, 2020a, p. 219).

In particular, my reading of *Tranz Talkz*, as well as *Burgerz*, through the lens of the aesthetics of care is illustrated by Thompson’s own reading of Peggy Shaw’s 2013 show *Ruff* (Thompson, 2020a).¹⁰³ In his analysis of *Ruff*, Thompson focuses on the many ways Shaw is aware of and manifests her vulnerability and interdependency to the audience, shows her need for people, and relies on a series of dramaturgical devices as a support structure which ultimately lays bare the relationship between audience and stage (Thompson, 2020a). Some of the elements Thompson identifies in Shaw’s performance can be found in Alabanza’s. Throughout the available recordings of some of the *Tranz Talkz*, there are various instances of practices that foster interdependence between the participants that, following Thompson, can be read as examples of Alabanza’s aesthetics of care. One of the first instances is observed at the very beginning when, while explaining how the dinner talk will function, Alabanza publicly recognizes that what they all are about to do is quite scary, and that they are scared (2018d, 5’45”). Similarly, the vulnerability they publicly recognize can also be found in the performance of *Burgerz*, where they also express their fear when they say “This feels scary, you... I think I want your help. Can you take my hand? Commitment is scary, right? How do you feel?” (Alabanza, 2018a, p. 19). This is not the only example, quite at the beginning of the show, Alabanza says

Maybe it is about knowing when you need help. Recognising when you could continue to struggle on your own, but would breathe lighter with someone else.

It feels weird because I do not know you, but I do not think this is a prerequisite for help. (2018a, p. 17)

¹⁰³ *Ruff* (2013) is a solo performance devised by Peggy Shaw and directed by Lois Weaver, based on Shaw’s personal experiences after suffering a stroke in 2011. For a full review of the piece see Gillespie, 2013.

Similarly, later in the play Alabanza admits “I’m so confused. I need you, but I can’t tell what that looks like” (2018a, p. 47), once again leaning into and revealing their vulnerable position, which following Thompson is a key element of the aesthetics of care.

The multiple ways they are caring for the participants in the events can be seen when they stop the discussion to publicly recognize those who are observing but have not felt ready to engage in the discussion, or when they encourage the participants to stop apologizing for their existence or victim-blaming themselves for the ways in which they responded to violence. Similarly, they introduce other forms of participation that take into consideration the fears some dinner guests might have of speaking in public. In the Coventry session, for example, Alabanza says

It’s really nerve-wracking to talk in front of a room of people you don’t know, on a grand table [...] so I wanted to do something that might feel a bit silly but it makes me feel better. How do we show that we are listening to people and that we are engaging? If someone says something and maybe you think “oh, I could have said that” because that feels like something you agree with or “I’ve experienced that too”, just give them a little [Alabanza illustrates gesture of raising their hand] like this, you know, so that people know when they’re talking, you are hearing, and that I’m with you on that. Because it can be really scary when we are talking about ourselves, not knowing if someone is with you. (2018d, 5’12”)

A recurrent form of care is observed in the multiple instances when they insist on welcoming silence as part of the process, as a valid response to the questions being asked and ultimately as a form of self-care. One particular instance worth highlighting is when they remark that

this space doesn’t need to include our traumatic stories in order to be a space, but if you want to comment on some of these experiences this is your space. I

feel awkward asking that, because I don't want to capitalize on trauma, but this archive is about public space. And the silence will be just as powerful (Alabanza, 218d, 1h04'17")

In this instance, Alabanza is reclaiming the use of silence – traditionally associated within feminism in general, and black feminism in particular to a form of oppression and violence – as a form of resistance. In *Tranz Talkz* silence becomes a space to breathe. Borrowing the words of Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carrillo Rowe, we can say that in the course of the dinner conversation “[s]tanding in silence allows for that breath, for that reflection that can create a space of great healing” (2013, p. 2). With that, Alabanza interrupts the dynamic that privileges voice over silence and introduces the use of silence as a resisting force, as well as a fundamental strategy for self-care. This notwithstanding, during the conversations traumatic experiences are recorded, fulfilling what Cvetkovich deems one of the central tasks of queer archives, which is to “enable the acknowledgment of a past that can be painful to remember, impossible to forget, and resistant to consciousness” (2003, p. 241).

Alabanza's promiscuous ethics of care are also present in how they interact with the audience during the performance of *Burgerz*. The role of the audience will be discussed in depth later in the chapter; however, it is important to note how the performer cares for those members who participate. In the case of the cisgender white male, he is never made to be purposely uncomfortable while they are on stage – despite the fact that it is not possible to predict their possible discomfort. Once again performing a series of actions that are part of reproductive labour, Alabanza welcomes the first participant to the stage, and as we can read in the stage direction “*TRAVIS then brings out a stool and a cushion from a box at the back*” (2018a, p. 19). Right after that, Alabanza says “Would you like a drink? I can get you white wine, red wine, rosé wine, G&T, vodka, Coke (diet as well), water, sparkling or still, Heineken, Carlsberg or... and orange Capri Sun” (2018a, pp. 19–20). Together with these acts, throughout the whole performance there are recurrent moments where Alabanza checks in with the

participant to ensure their well-being while on stage, so that care not only takes the form of reproductive labour. Reflecting upon his own participation on the play, David, an audience member that joins Travis in one of the performances at the Hackney Showroom said: “Travis is a really honest and powerful performer. I was invited on stage and it felt like a conversation, as much as it felt like a performance, which is really rare, but incredible to see” (Hackney Showroom, 2018a). Their experience of the performance as a conversation confirms how the exchange is framed by these ethics of care.

Simultaneously, Alabanza transfers the promiscuous ethics of care to the spectators. Two good examples of that are when they ask the cisgender man to get them a glass of water (2018a, p. 41); or when, at the end of the play, they gesture to a cisgender white woman in the audience and ask her to read the following passage, which is worth quoting here at length:

I vow to protect you, more than others have before. I vow to protect you, as in the plural, as in more than just you. I vow to realise that in my safety, in my comfort, in my silence, comes your danger, hurt, and entrapment. I vow to know that I cannot possibly be free, whilst you, the plural, are still hurt. I vow to know that I cannot remain silent when others are hurting, to recognise that silence is part of the hurting. I cannot, on my own, make them stop. Make them turn away. Make them look less. But I know that I can wake up. I know that I can do better. I vow to make sure that everyday I go outside I realise that I am not alone, that I am together, with you, the plural, and me, the plural – that there cannot be singular anymore. That we have tried singular, and we continue to fail. My freedom is not just tied to yours, but is not freedom without yours. (Alabanza, 2018a, pp. 59–60)

While in the first example, the cisgender male spectator is invited to take care of Alabanza, in the second one, the cisgender woman is encouraged to perform care for

everyone, but most importantly, for all those trans and gender non-conforming people who are at constant risk of experiencing violence and harassment in public spaces. She is, in short, invited to embrace promiscuity, as are all other members of the audience that she represents in that very moment.

4.2.4.2. Food and Intimate Places of Belonging

One of the central elements of *Burgerz* is, as the title indicates, the burger, which also features prominently in *Tranz Talkz* and *Burgerz and Chips with Travis Alabanza*. Towards the end of the various *Tranz Talkz* sessions, Alabanza asks a series of questions where participants are invited to answer by collectively sighing or with a show of hands. In the Coventry session, Alabanza asks people to raise their chips to answer to some of the questions they ask, to go with the “burger aesthetics” (2018d, 1h03’26”). Expanding on that fleeting joke, I want to suggest that throughout the three pieces that are part of the project, this burger aesthetics are fundamental, as they manifest as both a signifier of transphobia and of trans and queer community bonds.

In the *Burgerz* project, the relationship with the burger is ambivalent. The negative affects it carries in the play are both affirmed and subverted in the dinner talks. Still, the burger never stops carrying political meaning. While in the play it is a material signifier of transphobia, in the dinner conversations it is seized, in a similar fashion to the reappropriation of the term queer in the 1990s. This reappropriation, however, can only happen after exploring the negative affects the participants have shared in relation to their experiences of being outside, which include feeling lonely, alone, anxious, nervous, overwhelmed and vulnerable for fear of harassment. Not only that, some participants express more complicated or difficult to unpack affects, such as guilt and a sense of shame for not being harassed. Specifically, several transmasculine participants, express guilt because they know they will not experience the same kind of persecution that a transfeminine person would suffer (Alabanza, 2018c, 24’34”). It is important that

the re-signification of the burger does not take place without giving space to these emotions, resonating with Ahmed's claim that unhappy queers are a crucial part of queer genealogy (2010b, p. 89) and with Cvetkovich's previously quoted claim that recognizes the necessity to give space to painful pasts in the archive. This notwithstanding, while the burger in the transphobic incident is a signifier for world-shattering, through the play and in the conversation dinners it becomes a signifier of world-making.

The central dramatic action in *Burgerz* is, indeed, the cooking of the burger by Alabanza, assisted by a different white man in each performance, who reads the instructions contained in a red binder, while Alabanza shares with the audience their experiences of harassment and trauma. A particularly intense moment occurs when the instruction delivered is "Cook" (2018a, p. 37). After doubting, Alabanza sets a timer and starts to cook the burger standing in silence and staring at the pan for a prolonged time during which the only sound is that of the sizzling pan, and a smell of cooked beef starts to engulf the theatre. With both the sound and the smell in the background, Alabanza starts recollecting a series of experiences of being harassed in public spaces:

No one will sit next to me. My eyes go from floor, to their eyes, to door. Their eyes never leaving me. It was the Victoria line, Oxford Circus southbound to Brixton and someone had finally occupied the seat next to me. Things felt closer. I had my headphones in, but I had not music on; a melody is a privilege for those that do not need to be aware.

"What the fuck are you?"

I wanted to reply: "A person, another human, someone who deserves respect."
Or I wanted to hear the six other people that heard say something too.

We all stayed in silence. His hand was on my inner thigh for the rest of the journey. (2018a, p. 39)

The narration of this incident is followed by other moments in which they have been harassed, with a series of stage directions between each of them signalling “Heat intensifies” (2018a, p. 39) or “The heat rises” (2018a, p. 43), referring both to the temperature of the pan and the tone in which the lines are delivered. Shortly, a bass tension sound effect starts to be played, mixing with the sizzling of the cooking meat and Alabanza’s voice, which will only stop once the timer that indicates the cooking is done starts to sound. The sensory intensity of this moment establishes a very strong link between the invasive smell of the cooking burger and the experiences of harassment. In fact, minutes later, after the burger is assembled, Travis will enunciate: “Burgers are really messy. The texture of them can be quite coarse, invasive, sticky” (2018a, p. 52). The messy and sticky burger encapsulates the messiness of queerness discussed in the methodology section and the stickiness of emotions referred to earlier in this chapter, transforming the burger into a physical manifestation of pain, racism and transphobia but also, as discussed in the Queer Method chapter in relation to Audre Lorde, the erotic possibility of challenging dominant power structures. The assemblage of the burger finishes with these lines:

I became obsessed with how a burger feels and smells because I needed to recreate an intimacy with it that wasn’t forced. I needed to get to know it so I could pretend that we had a choice to meet each other. If I become obsessed with how the burger works, how it flies, how it smells and how it lands, then maybe I will have some agency over it. (2018a, p. 53)

While Travis moments later will admit that this does not work, that they “can’t lie and say [they] have any control” (2018a, p. 54), I want to suggest that both the intimacy they try to recreate with the play, and the feeling of control can be apprehended during *Tranz Talkz*.

The dining table has traditionally been a site of anxiety for queer people (Mannur, 2022, p. 12). Alabanza subverts that by transforming the dinner table into a

space where queer people thrive and where trans lives can be both livable and bearable lives. I take the concept of bearable lives from Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 97), which she precisely bases on, and expands from, Butler's theories of livability. For Ahmed, a bearable life is a life in which "what must be endured does not threaten that life" (2010b, p. 97), whereas an unbearable life is one in which the conditions of bearability cannot be sustained. As Ahmed further observes: "What makes for an unbearable life takes place *somewhere* between the subject and the world that throws 'things' up" (Ahmed, 2010b), a world that has made it acceptable for a man to throw a burger at Travis, in broad daylight, on Waterloo bridge. That Alabanza does this in a dinner table is of paramount importance for not only reappropriating the burger, but also for queering a space that has been a source of unhappiness for many trans, gender non-conforming and queer people, who have been oftentimes unwelcome at the family table after coming out. This notwithstanding, Alabanza's proposal does not legitimize the traditional dinner table – as a space where cis-heteronormativity and patriarchy are reproduced – but rather, creates a new table altogether.

Sara Ahmed has helped us unpack the ways tables have been places of exclusion for queer people (Ahmed, 2006b, 2010b, 2017b) suggesting that family dinner tables are spaces where normativity is reproduced. But, she has also defended that we should be weary of creating new tables that align with forms of homonormativity and thus reproduce conservative sexual politics, as well as indicated that creating new tables would potentially "leave the big table in its place" (Ahmed, 2006b). In the case of *Tranz Talkz*, I want to suggest that the table becomes an interstice where potentially this conundrum can be questioned. In relation to the places where we consume food, Anita Mannur states that "the public and the private intersect to create new spaces that give rise to alternative cultural imaginings that, at their best, reimagine radical possibilities for nonnormative bodies" (2022, p. 6). Mannur's theory is useful insofar as if we read *Tranz Talkz* through this lens, we can sustain that a new space is created in the dinner

discussions – which take place at the intersection of the public and the private, as these were held in public but with an intended audience formed by gender dissident bodies, therefore, we could claim, the event was not necessarily completely public, as it was not advertised as open to anyone. For Mannur, these new spaces become critical third spaces in which “food, forms of eating, and commensality become sites from which to resist imperialist policies, homophobia, practices of racial profiling, and articulations of white supremacy” (Mannur, 2022). Paying attention to these dinner discussions and how food becomes an integral part of them opens a path to “articulate nonnormative forms of intimacy that go beyond the idea of queerness as consonant with sexuality alone” (Mannur, 2022), while also resignifying the dinner table as a queer space, rather than a heteronormative, cisgender, space.

4.2.5. Temporal Drag and Queer Utopian Memory

Quite early in the play Alabanza changes out of their blue overalls and working boots. Making extensive use of the set, they partially hide inside a box – their limbs are still visible – to change their clothes. Coming out of the box now wearing a dress, Travis starts recollecting the first time they tried one on, only to quickly dismiss this by stating “What am I doing? I don’t remember the first time I tried on a dress. Oops, that’s it, go on, remove my trans card. I don’t remember” (2018a, p. 15). Here Alabanza eschews the conventional trans narrative which, written from a cis-heteronormative perspective, attempts to draft a coherent lineal understanding of a person’s coming to terms with their transness through instances in their childhood that point towards an identification with a gender different from that assigned at birth – and which become coherent only through a rigidly binary understanding of gender identity. On their recent book *None of the Above. Reflections on Life Beyond the Binary* (2022b),¹⁰⁴ Alabanza further develops how

¹⁰⁴ I want to thank Ian Bermúdez for being instrumental in my acquisition of the book in time to include Alabanza’s most recent reflections in the thesis.

the conventional trans narrative is ultimately a requirement in order to make trans people intelligible within a cisgender Western understanding of gender:

transness becomes all about the individual: how they were born, what genetics they may or may not have, how they are the anomaly to the rule – and less about the systems and circumstances that may have impacted the way they view themselves and their gender. It becomes all about how I gained knowledge around an immovable fact, rather than how cisgender and Western binary thinking made gender two immovable posts to define myself within. It works as a way to make us, the born-this-way-can't-change-us trans person, more understandable – and therefore, respectable. (2022b, pp. 30-31)

To further unpack this moment, I turn to Muñoz's concept of disidentification which, according to him, is produced by the performance of queerness. Disidentification is defined by him as “a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology” (1999, p. 97). Allan Taylor successfully summarizes this as a “transformative effect [which] can illustrate a variety of discourses of power in effect and unveil unspoken normative behaviours that are not questioned” (2020, p. 173). Alabanza's disruption of the dress narrative leads to Muñoz's disidentification by rendering visible the unquestioned behaviours attached to the gender binary. Concurrently, the disruption of the ‘first time I tried on a dress’ narrative already suggests that cis-heteronormative temporalities are going to be tampered with through the play. Indeed, different engagements with queer temporalities are a central feature of *Burgerz*, both in their relationship to the past as well as to the future through repeated acts of remembrance.

To begin to expand this idea, I want to return here briefly to the mostly non-Western gender non-conforming identities Alabanza draws on – the Hijra, the Bakla, the Kathoey, Two Spirit, Quariwarmi or the Femminiello (2018a, p. 28) – which, as has

been mentioned before, are presented by Alabanza as pre-colonization, and as such premodern, God-like worshipped figures. Following Elizabeth Freeman's writings on the links between queerness and temporality, we can see the appearance of these figures in the play as examples of the fact that "what has not entered the historical records, and what is not yet culturally legible, is often encountered in embodied, nonrational forms: as ghosts, scars, gods" (2007, p. 159). The appearance of these gods/ghosts reveals not only an attempt to archive racialized obliterated forms of gender non-conformity but also a wish to expose an overshadowed history by way of engaging differently, or queerly, with time. This exposes Alabanza's desire for a past that is not cisgender, or rather, a past where colonialism did not take place and as a corollary the rigid Western binary gender system would not have been imposed, resulting in the erasure of other forms of gender expression, which we now deem, within a binary paradigm, gender non-conforming. I want to put this in conversation with José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer utopian memory, developed in his worldmaking project *Cruising Utopia* (2009, p. 35). For Muñoz, memory is not only constructed but essentially political, and acts of remembering have "world-making potentialities" that are engulfed in "utopian longing" (2009, p. 35). In particular, Muñoz observes that "[u]topia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity [...] More important, utopia offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 35; emphasis in original). By remembering these premodern figures, which appear in the play both as gods, but also as ghost-line presences, Alabanza is haunted by a utopian past predating the structural violence of the gender binary which ultimately allows them to prefigure what can be. Paraphrasing Muñoz, the haunting presence of the premodern gods/ghosts, allows Alabanza critique the present "to see beyond its 'what is' to worlds of political possibility, of 'what might be'" (2009, p. 38), an orientation towards the future that becomes an essential part of their trans archiving project.

Whilst Alabanza's contribution towards archiving trans lives is therefore also manifested in their reclaiming of a history of gender non-conformity, other historical references are generally very subtle in *Burgerz*, yet they situate the play within the history and traditions of queer performance. One particular instance that may go unnoticed for those unfamiliar with queer subcultures is the reference to the histories of drag, ballroom culture and other queer subcultures and vocabularies that occurs when the white cisgender man gives Travis the instruction to "mince" (Alabanza, 2018a, p. 28). While it is quite evident that in the context of making a burger from scratch, mince refers to cutting or grinding the meat into very small pieces in order to assemble the burger, upon hearing the instructions Alabanza struts flamboyantly through the stage, striking a pose at the end while the audience claps, snaps their fingers and cheers, thus adhering to the queer slang definition of 'mince' which refers to campily walking with exaggerated feminine hand gestures. This fleeting moment is read very differently by the audience depending on their knowledge and familiarity with queer subcultures, resulting in an instance that simultaneously embraces and uplifts queer audience members, while most of the heteronormative audience might feel estrangement, defamiliarization and distance.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, I want to suggest that Alabanza's strut situates *Burgerz* in line with a tradition of gender non-conforming performance which includes drag and ballroom culture, as places where mostly gender non-conforming people of colour expressed themselves and found security, recognition, kinship, joy and community.

Although Alabanza's play is by no means a drag show, connecting briefly with some of the drag elements and conventions that we can find in the performance, such as the subversion of the term 'mince', allows us to further explore their approach to

¹⁰⁵ The use of heteronormative in this sentence particularly signals to those audience members with no knowledge whatsoever of queer subcultures, although I am fully conscious that some cisgender straight members of the audience might be familiarized with it.

temporality.¹⁰⁶ Early in the play, right after Travis asks the audience if they prefer hot dogs or burgers, they deliver the following lines:

Then you went there with your fucking utensils, your fucking cutlery, your fucking recipe books with no fucking seasoning and decided that we all had to choose between a fucking burger and a fucking hot dog, but it wasn't a choice, because you looked at me, and you said in one minute this person is a fucking person who eats burgers. As if I couldn't be that and more, as if I couldn't catch my breath, for a minute.

As if burgers isn't something that happens violently after it, as if burgers isn't violence in its definition. As if the burger isn't violent in its creation. As if violence doesn't happen to hot dog and burger-choosers, as if it starts when you are choosing between hot dog and burger, as if choosing... (2018a, pp. 13–14)

While Alabanza delivers these lines, which signal at the structural violence contained in the gender binary, the stage is engulfed in intense blue lighting, which is coupled with a penetrating bass sound that punctuates the power and violence of the lines. After the ellipsis, the stage direction reads “*TRAVIS realizes they are losing composure. They pause. Regain poise*” (2018a, p. 14). This regaining of poise is coupled in the performance with Travis looking at the audience and exclaiming “pew” (personal notes) to signal relief. After this, they leave space for the audience, who mostly laugh, to take in what has just happened. I will return to this moment later to discuss how it particularly serves to provide comic relief to make the audience comfortable, however, I want to focus now

¹⁰⁶ While not being a drag queen, Alabanza has often participated in drag and queer club culture. Since 2015, they have performed regularly at the Bar Wotever, Duckie and other shows at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, South London's oldest queer space which has been functioning as a LGBTQ+ cabaret since the 1980s. More recently they have also brought the art of drag and queer cabaret / club shows to mainstream venues. In 2017 they performed *Left Outside Alone* at the Tate Britain, as part of the museum's exhibition *Queer and Now*, where they used lip synch to respond to and protest the museum's and exhibition's lack of diversity. At the moment of writing, Alabanza's *Sound of the Underground* is being performed at the Royal Court Theatre. The play, which brings legends of the London queer club scene to the Sloane Square venue, is performed by drag and cabaret artists CHIYO, Lily SnatchDragon, Ms, Sharon Le Grand, Sadie Sinner the Songbird, Rhys' Pieces, Sue Gives a F*ck, Midgitte Bardot and Wer Mess

on the fact that there is something very draglike in the delivery and tempos of this particular moment.

Writing about drag and temporality, Freeman states that “what makes a drag show ironic and draglike [...] is the performer’s play with anachronism, ungainly or exaggerated gesture, off-beat timing and peek-a-boo-suspense” (2007, p. 161). Following the ‘pew’ moment, Travis gets inside a big box to get off the overalls and working shoes while peeking out their head and looking at the audience from inside the box. Once Travis is changed into a dress, they get up, still inside the box, and snap their fingers; the process of changing has been slow, comic, clumsy, yet they stand and snap their fingers as if they had done a reveal in a drag show.¹⁰⁷ Firstly, there are certain expectations here for the audience to react in a particularly excited way – when this did not happen in one of the Edinburgh performances Alabanza worryingly looked at the audience and snapped back with “ever since Drag Race you’ve become desensitized to a reveal” (personal notes).¹⁰⁸ Secondly, their clumsy garment change subverts the temporality of the drag reveal which foregrounds the intimate relationship between drag and time, and in particular, between *Burgerz* and time.

Stephen Farrier has explored the ways in which drag performances work as “a manifestation of a voice and channel to the past” (2016, p. 182). In particular, Farrier’s work has focused on the ways in which lip-synching brings temporal complexity into drag performances.¹⁰⁹ Mainly, he suggests that “in drag performance, and specifically in the moment of the lip-synch, there is a call to a place outside the immediate temporal world of the act, whilst the audience is also connected to the immediate world through

¹⁰⁷ In a drag show, the term reveal signals to a quick and unexpected outfit or wig change which the audience is expected to strongly react to.

¹⁰⁸ Alabanza refers here to the American reality TV competition series “RuPaul’s Drag Race”, which premiered in 2009 and has become a worldwide franchise, including “RuPaul’s Drag Rave UK”, broadcast by BBC3.

¹⁰⁹ Lip-synching – understood as the synchronized moving of one’s lips to a pre-recorded track – is one of the cornerstones of drag performance. Based on his reading of Carol Langley, Stephen Farrier sustains that lip-synching “appropriates the feminine voice; foregrounds the choreographic aspect of drag; serves as a vehicle of recognition; produces texture, layering and complexity; makes a political statement; and serves as a marker for the tradition of the reveal” (Farrier, 2016)

history and geographic specificity” (Farrier, 2016, p. 175). While we do not find lip-synching in *Burgerz*, the nods to drag culture discussed similarly contribute towards bringing temporal complexity to the performance. If, as Allan Taylor suggests, in drag “the performer [bends] cultural references for their own purposes” leading to the possibility of embodying a yet-to-come future (2020, p. 173), Alabanza *queers* the queer performance by bending the cultural references of drag in their out-of-tempo reveal, which ultimately transforms the slow-motion clumsy outfit change in almost an anachronism within the temporality of the drag show: by the time the new outfit is revealed, its time has already passed, the reveal is therefore temporally misplaced. Both anachronisms and connections to a yet-to-come future are part of Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of temporal drag which allows us to further associate Alabanza’s nods to drag with the ways in which temporality can be explored in the play.

Going back to Butler’s discussion on drag and gender performativity (1990), as well as taking into consideration the associations of the term drag with an altered temporality Freeman coined the term temporal drag, which, according to her, “may offer a way of connecting queer performativity to disavowed political histories” (2010b, p. 65). By paying attention to this double meaning of drag, we can thus understand temporal drag as “retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present” (2010b, p. 62). In *Burgerz*, temporal drag is manifested both through the out-of-tempo reveal, and the juxtaposition of Alabanza’s contemporary experience of gender with the premodern gender non-conforming identities. Another particular example can be found during the process of cooking the burger. For this purpose, let’s focus on the following stage direction: “*TRAVIS tries to focus on the cooking. As the cooking amplifies, you can hear the noises of the past and present. TRAVIS tries to remain focused on cooking.*” (2018a, p. 38). As indicated in the stage direction, through the sizzling sound of cooking a burger the noises of the past can be heard, together with those of the present, thus the past is dragged or pulled into the present. In order to attempt to contain the cooking – and therefore, contain this disrupted temporality – a cooking timer is used on stage. While

the first time the timer goes off Alabanza stops it and flips the burger, the timer is ignored the second time around. In the stage direction we can read: “*We reach a moment of climax with both sounds as the timer goes off. TRAVIS walks away from the kitchen. The timer remains beeping*” (2018a, p. 45). The two sounds referred to in the stage direction are the timer and Alabanza’s voice, who has been recalling instances of violence and harassment suffered by them. However, these instances cannot be contained within the neat parameters of a cooking timer. Similarly, temporal drag also manifests through the act of repeating Alabanza’s incident of harassment night after night, which effectively pulls Alabanza’s past into the present of the performance. In this sense, it is fundamental to keep in mind that Alabanza’s performance of the play requires them to recollect the harassment they suffered during each and every performance of *Burgerz*.

The constant recollection and repetition of this event can be read alongside the manifold ways in which, within queer studies, pain has been considered to be “socially and theoretically generative” (Freeman, 2010b, p. 10). Interrogating queer theory’s specific ways of knowing and their relationship to experiences of pain, Elizabeth Freeman writes:

queer becoming-collective-across-time and even the concept of futurity itself are predicated upon injury – separations, injuries, spatial displacements, preclusions, and other negative and negating forms of bodily experience – or traumas that precede and determine bodiliness itself, that make matter into bodies. (2010b, p. 11)

Attending to Freeman’s quote, and in particular to the “queer becoming-collective-across-time” I want to turn here to Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed’s writing on the reparative capabilities of memory to unpack the ways in which the recurrent act of remembering a painful event functions in the play, to explore if and/or how this is generative of a queer becoming-collective. Writing about AIDS and queer pasts, Castiglia and Reed understand memory as a creative process that is both

disruptive and inventive, and that does not simply consist of retrieving the archived past, but entails “something more imaginative and more driven by present needs” (2011, p. 11). It is precisely this creativity that they credit when they define memory as a socially transformative medium which is produced from need: “singly or collectively, we remember what we need to know” (ibid.).

In Alabanza’s project, memory features both in the play, which is built upon an act of remembering, as well as in the discussion dinners, which in their aim to constitute archives of trans lives, become the creation of memories. It is important to highlight that the archive of trans lives that is materialized in the recordings of these dinners not only collects a series of memories of pain and harassment, but also moments of queer and trans joy that emerge in the instances where laughter, inside jokes and mutual recognition emerge and spill through the cracks of the recordings. Reading this through Castiglia and Reed we can see these instances as examples of the reparative capabilities of memory, which they see as essential for “the articulation of queer subjects, queer subcultures, and progressive queer politics” (2011, p. 26). Essentially, they sustain that:

The liminality of memory – poised between individuality and collectivity, presumed factuality and pure invention, past and future, loss and expectation – is what makes it whatever, a practice of ethical possibility in Agamben’s sense, challenging the ontological, temporal, and moral certainties of the present’s moral orders. (2011, p. 28)

Their understanding of memory’s reparative capabilities is grounded on Michel Foucault’s concept of *askesis* – a meditative self-transformation central to the care of the self (2011, p. 26) – which they propose to understand as a collective practice (social askesis) that if undertaken, contributes towards the generation of communities.

In the context of Alabanza’s work, the practice of ethical possibility is located in the relationship we can establish between memory – both in the play as an act of

remembrance and in the dinners as an act of creating memories – and an orientation towards the future. This can be observed in the following two quotes. The first one belongs to one of the dinner discussions that are part of *Tranz Talks*:

I wanted the last question to revolve around the fact that this recording we've got here, in Coventry, at the Belgrave Theatre, will still exist in fifty years, and it's going to be really celebrated at the Bishopsgate. They're really excited about holding all these different voices. And I just wanted the last question to be, if we were looking to the future, what is something that you would want someone to know about your experience, that you feel like they don't know now? What is something that you would like to tell them? (Alabanza 2018d, 1h12'44")

One of the things this quote illustrates is Carolyn Steedman's affirmation that "[t]he archive is a record of the past at the same time as it points to the future" (in Gale & Featherstone, 2011, p. 17). This orientation towards the future can also be observed in this second quote by Alabanza:

I still to this day have not found a piece of work that makes me feel what *Burgerz* does. It was challenging, but I felt in control. I was healing in the sense that, for me, art allows us to not just reflect a present, but also a possible future. That possible future is healing, a future where Black trans people can make whiteness sweat from its pores, make them cry, make them apologize, make them question. (Affan, 2021, p. 99)

In both fragments Alabanza establishes a connection between revisiting their traumatic past as a way to heal or repair the present and pave the way for a more liveable future for – particularly racialized – queer, trans and gender non-conforming people. In the next section I expand this idea to look at how the co-presence of the audience contributes to further Alabanza's project of livability and worldmaking.

4.2.6. Assembly and Worldmaking

In this final section Alabanza's work is read alongside the concepts of assembly and queer worldmaking. To do that, special attention is paid to the ways in which both the play and the conversation dinners relate to their different audiences. Ultimately, I want to suggest that with both, *Burgerz* and *Tranz Talks*, Alabanza is creating a social fabric that holds people together, which is, according to Jian Neo Chen, the result of trans culture placing embodiment and experience "within social relationships of love, family, and kinship [and] highlighting trans beauty" (Lehner, 2021, p. 44)

4.2.6.1. The Audience's Discomfort

Burgerz subverts the normative distribution of comfort/discomfort amongst queer and non-queer bodies. To better understand how audience discomfort will be approached, Beck Tadman's work on Alabanza provides a valuable precedent. Writing about their performance piece *Left Outside Alone*, which they took to the Tate Modern in July 2017, Tadman has problematized and interrogated the figure of the white cis spectator.¹¹⁰ The performance was part of a series of events that took place throughout British cultural institutions to celebrate the 50-year anniversary of the partial decriminalization of homosexuality in England and Wales; it constituted Alabanza's response to the Tate Modern exhibition *Queer British Art (1861-1967)* and their criticism of the cis-white-male domination of London performance spaces and scene. The piece combined a pre-recorded soundscape opening with the words "White walls... White people, white walls" (Tadman, 2021, p. 174), which contained the artist's frustration with the lack of Black representation in both institutional art venues and queer performance spaces, with Alabanza lip-synching to Anastacia's song "Left Outside Alone".¹¹¹ Tadman's main argument suggests that through Alabanza's "confrontational oppositional gaze"

¹¹⁰ For a link to the performance see footnote number 78.

¹¹¹ The song "Left Outside Alone" was released by US-born and based singer Anastacia in 2004, as the lead single of her third album *Anastacia*.

(2021, p. 196), the performance activates the audience's cis-white-fragility¹¹² while simultaneously encourages spectators "to *see* them, to engage, to question how they understand what they see, producing a subjective narrative that 'gazes back' at the power structures that objectify, silence and inflict both symbolic and physical violence on them" (2021, p. 196; emphasis in original).¹¹³ I want to build on Tadman's reading of Alabanza's work to suggest that in *Burgerz*, the audience member's fragility is not only activated through challenging their cisgender heteronormative gaze, but also through a redistribution of discomfort.

Watching their play, the cisgender and/or non-queer body enters a queer space where they are the ones who feel discomfort, as their body does not sink comfortably into the space. In her work on queer feelings, Sara Ahmed explores the distribution of comfort on the premise that "[n]ormativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it" (2004, p. 147). By choosing the verb inhabit – to dwell, occupy a space, settle in a place – Ahmed already hints at the connections between comfort and space, suggesting that "in feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies", whereas discomfort is "a feeling of disorientation: one's body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled" (2004, p. 148). Ahmed's main argument is centred on exploring the relationships between heteronormative and homonormative lives, suggesting that

¹¹² The concept cis-white fragility refers to white cisgender discomfort when issues affecting racialized and gender non-conforming people are discussed, and the refusal to challenge the discrimination and violence suffered by QTBIPOC. The concept brings together Robin DiAngelo's theories on 'white fragility' (2018) with 'cis-fragility' which as Tadman states, has been developed in trans-inclusive activist circles (2021, p. 170). While, as Tadman suggests, these concepts provide a conceptual frame that is useful to analyze the response to Alabanza's oppositional gaze, it is important to note that DiAngelo – herself a white cisgender woman who works as a diversity consultant – has been criticized for developing her arguments on white fragility by "talking down to black people" (McWhorter, 2020) and failing to account for the diversity within blackness and whiteness (Bejan, 2020).

¹¹³ Tadman borrows this concept from bell hooks's text "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" (2003), where hooks draws on the traumatic relationship between the gaze and black bodies to theorize the figure of the black female spectator. Going back to her own experiences as a black child who was discouraged to gaze back, as well as the many examples of white slave-owners punishing black enslaved people for looking, hooks concludes: "all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze" (2003, p. 93); this oppositional gaze is defined as "a gaze of defiance and protest, a political rebellion that has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally" (ibid.).

assimilation – adhering to “ideals of conduct that [are] central to the reproduction of heteronormativity” (2004, p. 149) – ultimately supports the intrinsic violence of the heteronormative system. Expanding from this, I want to suggest that Alabanza’s denial to adhere to a recognizable form in the gender binary produces the same discomfort within the parameters of cisnormativity. This is achieved by queering the space of the theatre and, to paraphrase Ahmed, transforming the scripts of compulsory cisnormativity (2004, p. 152).

One of the ways in which discomfort is redistributed is by Alabanza staring back at the audience, “challenging spectators to reflect on their cis and white gazes through a confrontational oppositional gaze” (Tadman, 2021, p. 169). As Alabanza has reflected:

So often in public I’m making myself smaller, looking down, being quiet, hiding – and onstage I can reverse that [...] It is interesting what happens to a room when we see a trans person be dominant; it is not something we are used to. It feels so often our liberation is tied into us being submissive, and I enjoy the stage being a chance to change this. (As cited in Tadman, 2021, p. 186)

An example can be seen in one of the performances of *Burgerz* at the Hackney Showroom, which has been recorded and is now part of the venue’s archive. As previously discussed, early in the play Alabanza discloses that they need someone to help them cook and say: “So, who will help me make a burger... anyone?” (2018a, p. 18). At this precise moment the house lights are switched on to reveal the audience and we can see a slow show of hands. After observing the candidates, Alabanza continues “I never thought I’d say this, but I need a man. I think we have some shit we gotta work through. I need a white man. I need... a cis white man... to help me. Make a burger” (2018a, p. 19). This moment elicits laughter from the audience. A handful of men raise their hands and Travis makes them keep their hands up while they decide who to invite. They take their time, gaze back, observe, consider. While this is going on, one man in the front row puts his hand down to which Travis looks at the audience

and states “he’s decided against it” (personal notes), quickly afterwards they look at the man and respond to his lowering of the hand with “if you couldn’t keep your hand up for that long you won’t be able to stand up here; survival of the fittest” (personal notes). This unscripted instance momentarily transforms the play into a political queer cabaret, where the laughter from the audience has multiple different connotations. While white cisgender laughter is probably nervous – the kind of laughter where audiences wish they could become invisible, disappear in the mass and under no circumstances be seen by the performer – queer and racialized laughter is a pure expression of joy, and as such it is revolutionary. Conspicuously, the normative distribution of comfort and discomfort is altered to the point where cis-normative bodies are the ones not sinking comfortably into space.

Ahmed importantly also touches upon the discomfort queer people feel in queer spaces. As she puts it, “[a]t times, I feel uncomfortable about inhabiting the word ‘queer’, worrying that I am not queer enough, or have not been queer for long enough, or am just not the right kind of queer. We can feel uncomfortable in the categories we inhabit, even categories that are shaped by their refusal of public comfort” (2004, p. 151). Examples of this discomfort have also been expressed by participants in *Tranz Talkz*. One participant in the Cambridge session expressed:

I came here as an experiment. I’ve often felt that I haven’t been nonbinary enough to come to spaces which are for trans and nonbinary people, and I think that’s why this is so important, because it lets me not only voice those things, but I also get confirmation that other people feel this way as well. That’s something that is really important to me and something I really gladly take away from this experience, so I am so grateful for it (Hackney Showroon, 2018b)

However disheartening, following Ahmed we can also sustain that the “non-fitting or discomfort opens up possibilities, an opening up which can be difficult and exciting” (2004, p. 154). If we persevere in our understanding of queer as anti-normative, and

queer lives as those that both produce discomfort and live with it, we can see how in *Burgerz*, the redistribution of discomfort operates at two distinct levels. Firstly, by creating a space that does not cater to cis-normative people, queer bodies can inhabit the space of the theatre, which extends onto their bodies, subverting the normative distribution of comfort, and thus creating – or shall we say ‘making’ – a new world. Secondly, by extending discomfort onto cis-normative bodies, their normative position in the world is ‘queered’. Space does not extend onto their bodies, thus disrupting their everyday relationship with the world.

The distinct experiences of discomfort Alabanza’s work prompts on the spectator are premeditated by the artist. Speaking about their choice of song for the Tate performance, Alabanza stated:

I wanted to create a moment that we could share [...] the exhibition didn’t create this [...] I picked a song that would immediately separate the room. Anyone that had been to a queer club, grown up gay, whatever – would know Anastacia’s *Left Outside Alone* is an absolute banger. Anyone that’s outside the community would be like, “This song is so dated! What the hell? What a weird song!” You can actually see that in the video, some people rejoice and go “Yes!” when the song comes on and I wanted that moment, of declaring who the room was for and who it wasn’t for, and that’s why I used lip synching as well. (as cited in Tadman, 2021, p. 179)

A dramaturgical strategy to achieve the same effect and distinguish who the room is for in *Burgerz* is the use of drag references explored in the previous section, which like the use of Anastacia’s song, becomes a “device of signalling solidarity and of community building” (Tadman, 2021, p. 179). Despite this, the very same drag references used are also questioned by Alabanza, who has stated that:

Intentional gender nonconformity is seen as OK, if it sticks within your assigned gender at birth. We are OK with the pantomime dame, or RuPaul’s

Drag Race, or even pop culture figures like Harry Styles in a skirt – as long as that person does not claim the change to be anything other than visual. As long as it stays within the realms of clear performance. (2022b, p. 67)

Rather than being contradictory, what this shows is Alabanza's commitment with shedding light into the ways in which queer culture can become part of the mainstream without contributing to the liberation of queer subjects, or to the dismantling of cis-heteronormativity. Together with their critique of assimilation, and in line with their overall artistic project, Alabanza "created a simultaneously intimate and exclusive atmosphere, dependent on audience positionality" (Tadman, 2021, p. 179). In *Burgers* there is a juxtaposition of security and distress – the aforementioned 'phew' moment serves as an example of how laughter is used to balance these two extremes – that creates a motion where the cis-heteronormative audience is lured in and kept out, welcomed and distanced, which ultimately produces a sense of uneasiness. The audience is metaphorically rocked to the point where their stomachs start to unsettle and discomfort sets in. For those spectators who are willing to engage with this discomfort, the experience has the potential to open up new spaces outside of the theatre, where cis-normative bodies who have experienced this discomfort can contribute towards making new, queerer worlds.¹¹⁴ This last argument is not short of problematic, especially if this takes the form of a simple performance of progressive politics.

¹¹⁴ I developed this idea after teaching *Burgers* in a course on contemporary literatures in English offered to second year undergraduate students at the University of Barcelona. My class – where almost sixty students were enrolled – was formed mainly by cisgender white students. While in general they openly voiced their concern for the violence experienced by trans people in general, and black transfeminine people in particular, none of them wanted to publicly engage with the discomfort the play elicited, nor publicly reflect on how they may contribute to uphold the very same system that the play puts into question, with some of them requiring to gloss over this and move to the next text/topic in the syllabus.

4.2.6.2. Performing Progressive Politics

While *Burgerz* has the potentiality to elicit solidarity from the audience, in an interview regarding their work in Gal-dem Magazine, Alabanza stated

I'm expecting fake solidarity from white people – particularly white women. I think white women in many ways are leading and upholding transmisogyny and patriarchy at the moment. When the man threw the burger at me, I wasn't surprised, but what I'm still processing is that all the women around didn't do anything. And what I've seen when we've done the show is that the first people to cry in the room are white women. The first people to protest are the white women. What I want to see is whether that performance in the room will go out into the real world. (Frazer-Carroll, 2018)

As already stated, the show is built around the premise of establishing a dialogue with an white cisgender man while they help Travis cook a burger, as well as with a white woman at the end of the play, an interaction I will return to later. However, both the scripted parts of the exchange, as well as the clearly marked development of the play challenge the possibility of a real dialogue between participant and performer, problematized even further by the “fraught complexities of the volunteer-performer relationship” (Gates, 2019). Interestingly, as some reviews suggest, audience members were sympathetically drawn to the white man's responses, while others have mentioned the shortcomings of the format pointing that perhaps the white man was not heard enough in the performance (Gates, 2019), expressing their frustration at the targeting of audience members or suggesting that it is weird to “target that frustration at an audience that's primarily made up of queer people and straight allies who care enough to buy a ticket” (Saville, 2019a). It is precisely this notion of allyship, one that consists simply on showing up, that Alabanza is contesting through their play, and through the distribution of discomfort. An example of this can clearly be seen during the cooking process, when Alabanza asks the man to add the spice to the meat that will become the burger. After the man reads the instruction to “spice” and Travis makes a first attempt

to add spice to the mix, they say “I REALLY should not be adding my own spice to this mince” (2018a, p. 29). This statement has multiple levels of interpretation. One that connects it to the traditions of queer performance previously discussed – as well as to a history of racialized understandings of food – and another that will lead to Alabanza’s denouncing of white people performing progressive politics.

Firstly, asking a cisgender white man to add spice becomes a comment, and an inside joke, on both, the lack of spice in white and cis people, as well as on the common trope that sustains that white food is bland – in fact moments later Travis will explicitly say “This burger can’t be bland” (2018a, p. 29). Together with this, the scene also reverses and plays with the stereotype that connects ideas of black and/or queer people as being spicy, having more flavour or being saucy, foodrelated adjectives that, coming from cis-white people can be used to mask disapproval for racialized queer people expressing their true self. Secondly, having a white man handle the spices – one of the condiments most associated with colonialism – turns the scene into a comment on the extractivist nature of the colonial system, which harvested spices while simultaneously homogenised them, turning this small moment into the second comment Alabanza makes about contemporary colonial legacies. The homogenizing of spices from former colonized territories is most evident in the overwhelming presence of curry in British supermarkets, restaurants, etc. As Anita Mannur states, “curry was a way for colonizers to contain the vastness of empire and consume the difference within it, even though curries varied dramatically in taste, smell, and texture among the various places they were consumed” (Mannur, 2022). This is somehow replicated by Alabanza when they tell the white man “don’t name any of the spices in the ingredients list” (2018a, p. 30). While this can be interpreted as a way of keeping the secret that gives the burger a special and unique flavour, it also becomes a comment on the historical relationship between white people and food from their former colonized territories. Failing to name the spices leads, paraphrasing Mannur, to the spice jar becoming and containing the empire, the differences within which are erased.

In relation to the second level of interpretation, the exchange between Travis and the man continues with Alabanza asking him to help them add the spice into the mince. In the middle of the process, they say:

Go on. Stop. Take a breather. I know all this work is hard on you. It must be so exhausting. To constantly have to respond to people's request for more fucking spices. I can tell you're tired. So in a minute I'm going to say "go on" and you will add the last bit of spice. Then you will take your seat. Later you will go home. And write a long Facebook status about how good you feel that you did this, and that when this burger is made you will make sure everyone knows it could not be made without your invaluable, groundbreaking, spice-related work. People will comment on that Facebook status and tell you that you are such a good person, and if you ever make a mistake in the future, people will say, "This person could have never made that mistake because one time they added spice, to this fucking burger." Go on. (Alabanza, 2018a, pp. 30–31)

This long interjection – which is soft spoken by Alabanza while crouching down on the kitchen isle, illuminated by zenithal lighting – foregrounds how many times white and cisgender self-proclamation as allies is only performative, and can be linked to Alabanza's own claim that they expected "fake solidarity from white people" (Frazer-Carroll, 2018), underscoring the ways in which the play is also a commentary on performative politics.

Alabanza's strong criticism of performative politics is coupled with their reflections on the difficulty of existing in public space as a trans person. On that they have insisted that "there is a pressure for me to change my body so I can breathe. But, I know if I ever said that out of context people would assume it was because I couldn't breathe internally, when it's an external breathing" (as cited in Roche, 2020, p. 62). At the forefront of Alabanza's demand lies a basic call for recognition, as, "to be radically deprived of recognition threatens the very possibility of existing and persisting" (Butler,

2015, p. 40). But together with recognition, Alabanza also enacts a claim to the public sphere, one that is safe for the gender non-conforming body. I want to quote Butler at length here, as they reminds us that

[s]ometimes there are quotidian acts that are very often at stake when we seek to understand performative politics in its struggle from and against precarity. As we know, not everyone can take for granted the power to walk on the street or into a bar without harassment [...yet] when a transgender person walks on the street [...] there is a question of whether that right can be exercised by the individual alone. If the person is extraordinarily good at self-defence, perhaps it can; if it is in a cultural space where that is accepted, it surely can. But if and when it does become possible to walk unprotected and still be safe, for daily life itself to become possible without fear of violence, then it is surely because there are many who support that right even when it is exercised by one person alone. (2015, p. 51)

In Butler's words we find the same claim for enacting true allyship, one that is grounded on the complete recognition of the Other and detached from a performance of progressive politics. An analysis of the ending of the play in the next section shows us how Alabanza suggests that true engagement with the Other has the potential to create new worlds.

4.2.6.3. *Burgerz* and Queer Worldmaking

Despite orbiting around an act of violence, the ending of *Burgerz* signals towards a hopeful future. Writing about the proliferation of trans visual culture, Susan Stryker stated,

I see the current proliferation of trans stories as providing a glimmer of hope for a different ordering of the world, a way of reflecting a deeper shift in the culture regarding how we understand bodies, difference, social categorization,

identity, the nation, populations, racialization, settler colonialism, and global capital” (Lehner, 2021, p. 41).

Through this glimmer of hope, Alabanza’s work highlights what Muñoz referred to as “the real force of performance” understood as “the ability to generate a modality of knowing and recognition among audiences and groups that facilitates modes of belonging, especially minoritarian belonging (2009, p. 99). Butler’s reading of Muñoz in relation to the future of minoritarian subjects reminds us that for those whose future is uncertain potentiality emerges “when some collective tears open the map to see what other pathways are possible” (2018, p. 7), yet this potentiality requires a new spatiotemporal organization of the world. Butler then poses this fundamental question:

Who is going to do that organization work? How do any of us challenge and change the spatiotemporal organization of a world that reserves the future for subjects endowed with the capacity and privilege to claim it, that is, for subjects who reproduce that very claim?” (2018, p. 7)

Alabanza’s play constitutes this demand by confronting the position of the audience as active bystander to their pain. I want to read the ending of the play through Muñoz’s ideas on the potentiality of performance to create new worlds, in order to explore if we can not only envision this futurity but also contribute to create it. In his writings on performances in queer spaces, Muñoz states, “I remember the potentiality that those scenes of spectatorship promised even before performers showed up onstage” (2009, p. 109). In Alabanza’s demand and confrontation with the audience, where we are challenged with how to ethically respond to the suffering they are disclosing, the seed for a transformation of a present where trans and gender non-conforming lives are still not recognized as livable lives can be glimpsed. However, there is a strong tension between this desire for transformation and queer worldmaking and the material reality in which trans people are living in at the moment in the UK and other parts of the world. Butler reminds us that “solidarity is not exactly a form of love, unless we

understand ambivalence as constitutive of love. It does require persistence and an openness to connection precisely where it is not expected. We don't need to identify with one another, but we need to converge at the site of our dissidentification" (2018, p. 17).

After the white man has left the stage, Alabanza invites a white woman to join them, following these words:

No one did anything. But someone else did notice. I remember there were two people's eyes I saw after the burger had been thrown. The man, and a lady across the street. Her eye caught mine for two seconds. She saw me holding back tears. She saw what had happened. She saw the man, and then saw me, and then looked down. And she carried on walking. With everyone else, who carried on walking. And I'm not going to say anymore that no one did anything, because walking away is action, is action that you choose. Because doing nothing is not neutral (2018a, pp. 57–58)

The woman who joins Travis on stage is given the recipe binder and asked to read a pledge where they vow to protect Travis, as well as other trans and gender non-conforming people, in ways that others have not done before (see full quote on page 200 in this chapter). As she reads, we are confronted, together with her, with her (our) role as 'active bystander' in the face of transphobia. In this way, *Burgerz* exposes the tensions that reside between, on the one hand, "the inherently political nature of our gathering as an audience" (Greer, 2019, p. 9), and on the other, performances of fake solidarity that do nothing to effectively challenge transphobia. In particular, the play strongly criticizes forms of performative allyship that instead contribute towards upholding transmisogyny and patriarchy in the current context of gender terror.

Halfway through the white woman's pledge to protect trans lives, Travis hands her the burger they have just cooked, with the aim that she will throw it at them. The woman reads:

When I throw this burger I will throw it, not to hurt you again, but to acknowledge that I have hurt you before. That my hand may have not thrown the bun, the beef, the patty, but my silence still burns. I did not need to throw the burger with my own hand to still hear it hit. I throw this burger, to bring this vow of words into action. An action born out of violence with a hope to turn into some promise. A promise to do better. For each other. For others. I will say sorry. We will count to three, together. I will throw this burger at you. It will fall to the ground. And I will go back to my seat. And you will leave the stage. And I will go home. So will you. But outside, we are now together.

I'm sorry.

One... Two... Three... (2018a, p. 60-61)

Written with the apparent aim of this being a cathartic ending where the meaning of throwing a burger at a trans person will be deconstructed and the action resignified – in the published play text, the stage direction that immediately follows reads “*The burger is thrown at TRAVIS*” (2018a, p. 61) –, in none of the three performances analysed for this chapter did the woman throw the burger at Travis. In the performance at the Traverse theatre in Edinburgh that I attended, the woman refused and was invited to go back to her seat. Similarly, in the performance at the London Southbank, the woman also refused. In this case, their unscripted exchange on stage went as follows:

WOMAN I don't know how to do this, you really want me to?

TRAVIS Would you throw this burger at me?

WOMAN Only if I feel in some way it may help you. I really don't want to unless you need me to, for some reason

TRAVIS Would you throw this burger at me?

WOMAN [Sighs. With a broken voice] I don't know. I really don't want to

TRAVIS signals for her to go back to her seat

WOMAN Have I let you down?

They don't answer

TRAVIS [*to the audience*] Would anyone throw this burger at me?

Nobody volunteers

(personal notes)

Both in the Traverse and in the London Southbank performances, Travis threw the burger to the back wall of the stage, rescripting the ending but retaining the element of catharsis in a final display of agency. In the recorded performance from the Hackney Showroom, where the woman invited on stage also refused to throw the burger, the exchange with Travis went as follows:

TRAVIS Would you throw this burger at me?

WOMAN I don't want to throw the burger at you, but if you feel like it...

[*laughs nervously*] It is you, it is what you want

TRAVIS Would you throw this burger at me?

WOMAN No, of course I don't want to throw a burger at you

TRAVIS says something to her inaudible to the audience and also inaudible in the recording.

They move her to the tip of the stage, with their backs to the audience, they both say "three, two, one" and she throws the burger to the stage, but not to Travis.

(personal notes)

Besides the initial confrontational moment of asking a white woman to throw a burger at them, the ending of the play signals to new possible futures and invites us – in our role as bystanders – to actively contribute to them, transforming the final scene into a utopian performative, a “fleeting intimation of a better world” (Dolan, 2005, p. 2), especially if we focus on these three examples where the ending published in the text is rewritten by the three white women who counter Alabanza’s suspicion of fake solidarity on their part. Throwing a warm burger to the back of a stage is certainly messy, and an expression of pain, however, as Nic KAY has expressed while speaking about trans art:

There is pain and loss but also, increasingly, conversations about joy and ideas of futurity, which are wonderful, and we need this and all the good things and the intersecting messy moments that lead to growth. We need the club, the sound, the outer-body experiences, and we need change (Lehner, 2021, p. 46).

Once each of the women has rejected throwing the burger, Alabanza transfers the question “Would you throw a burger at me?” (my notes) to the rest of spectators. Both when asking the women and the complete audience, the question can be interpreted in two distinct ways. The most straightforward interpretation signals towards Alabanza asking them if they will throw the burger in the here and now of the performance, containing within it the request to participate in the show and help build the ending together. Yet the question also hides a second interpretation, one containing the question ‘would you *ever* throw a burger at me?’ which can be rephrased as ‘would you ever enact violence towards me?’, and even reformulated as ‘would you ever partake in an active form of transphobia?’. The general refusal to throw a burger at them can also be interpreted in multiple ways. Certainly, part of the audience will refuse for their fear or reservations to participate in a live performance, afraid of being asked to go on stage. Members of the audience will also refuse as a way to perform their progressive politics and be able to support their role as allies in this very act of refusal. But if we allow ourselves to be hopeful, the refusal to throw the burger is also an answer to Alabanza’s veiled question ‘would you ever partake in an active form of transphobia?’. In this refusal we can also see a glimpse of a different future, an instance of queer worldmaking.

5. Interval no. 2: Discomfort is Messy

A few months before writing this text, I go to a drag show with a group of friends. We are four white cisgender women, only one of which (myself) identifies as queer. The show, built in the form of an anti-talent contest, takes place in the open air and is organized by a grassroots community of activists. The host for the evening is Personaje Personaje, a self-identified travesti and psychologist from Ecuador.¹¹⁵ During their interventions, Personaje Personaje untangles and interrogates the many unexamined forms racism takes in Spain, Catalonia, Barcelona and the grassroots community space we are sharing. They raise questions about desire towards trans bodies. They demand not only recognition but also active reparations for the racialized trans community, and above all, they are set on reminding the cis white members of the audience, no matter how progressive they (we) believe themselves (ourselves) to be, that sitting and clapping during a drag show is not an antiracist practice, nor does it effectively contribute on its own to eradicate transphobia. As part of the anti-talent show, the participants are required to collect as many shoes as possible from the audience. It is a warm August night and in front of the stage a mountain of Birkenstocks piles up. I give mine to a drag king; my friends try to avoid eye contact with the performers so as not to give theirs. Minutes later, when I walk barefoot to the Birkenstock mountain, the soil is muddy and I step into a pool of water – or perhaps beer, or dog pee – I manage to find my shoes and walk back to my seat. One of my friends is really rattled by what she defines as ‘the unnecessary confrontational nature of the performance’. Why are we being confronted in such a violent way, she asks, when we are here? Why not take it with those who did not even show up?

¹¹⁵ The term *travesti* historically used to define men who cross-dress as women, and mostly obsolete in the West, is prevalent in Latin America to refer to a multiplicity of forms of gender non-conformance, including, but not exclusive of, trans identities. The term is strongly connected to forms of drag, and as such, it is understood to consciously reveal a disconnection between gender expression and gender roles, although that does not mean that everyone who identifies as a travesti is also a drag performer. For activists such as Personaje Personaje, the travesti identity reinforces dissidence and dynamic subversion (Ballesta, 2021).

Writing about his own experience as a white spectator in Testament's *Black Men Walking*, Michael Pearce writes

because white people don't often experience being "seen" as white, this experience has the potential to make white audience members [...] aware of their whiteness and the whiteness around them. This is not achieved through guilt—the monologue is not accusatory—but through discomfort. (2021, p. 344)

My friend's discomfort – upon being 'seen' as white and cis – puzzles me, but also pushes me to ask another series of questions. Why is she (perhaps unconsciously) focusing on her own discomfort while also refusing to stay with it? Is this prevalent amongst cis white spectators (us) attending performances that question their (our) privilege? But most importantly, now that I have identified this discomfort – which is not mine in this performance, but which I have also experienced before – what do I do with it?

In this final interval, I return to some of the ideas sketched in the methodology to further interrogate the relationship between the audience of *ear for eye* and *Burgerz* and feelings of discomfort. In particular, I go back to the question of the queer mess as a starting point to cross-examine the discomfort experienced by white and cisgender audience members. In order to do this, I draw on both, theatre reviews, as well as my own experience – as a white, cisgender, bisexual, working-class woman – watching both plays.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer an appraisal of recent writings on theatre spectatorship, it is important to not shy away from the conceptual and methodological problems embedded in writing about or predicting spectators' responses. In her own writing on the topic Verónica Rodríguez states,

[t]he transformations the understanding of the spectator (in terms of the characteristics attached to her and the locations and activities she has dis / engaged with) has undergone are multifarious—the spectator has walked, has taken roles, has played (in) games, has turned into the spectated, has immersed

herself, has co-created shows, has given up her time to the labour of theatre, etc. (2019, pp. 89–90)

This goes to prove that scholars have been on the lookout for new modes of talking about theatre spectatorship, where spectators have been recognised as always already “emancipated” (Ranci re, 2009, p. 1), “racialized” (Aragay & Monforte, 2013, p. 96), “sexualized” (Monforte, 2014, p. 152), “holed” (Rodr guez, 2019, p. 89) or “autonomous” (Tomlin, 2019, p. 1). My proposal does not merely wish to add another adjective to the list but rather reflect on the difficulties and power relationships embedded in the writing on spectatorship, or more concretely, in writing as *a* spectator. Questions such as ‘who gets to be a spectator?’ for example are central to the analysis of plays such as the ones discussed here. This resonates with Pearce when he writes that “[t]he theatre landscape might also be described as a comfortable space for people for whom it is most familiar, that is, the white middle-class demographic” (2021, p. 344). In the chapter on queer method, I announced that messiness was a way to approach spectatorship. My own frustration with trying to write about spectatorship is how to do it. If I extrapolate my own experience and reading of the play to the experience of all spectators, I will be forcing one particular reading / interpretation and obscuring the rest. Not only that, but I will fail to acknowledge that my experience of a play is not the same as that of someone who is not white and / or cis, to focus on just two of the aspects of our identity that influence our ways of inhabiting the world, and as such, the space of the theatre. The only conclusion that I have reached is that writing about the spectator is messy, and perhaps, that needs to be my starting point. The mess, despite not being present in hegemonic academia, is productive. In the case of spectatorship studies, the mess results from making evident the tension between the fascination that the figure of the spectator produces, and the complications derived from trying to write about them.

I start this interrogation of discomfort and spectators from within the mess. In Act Two I have identified how, white and cisgender reviewers and scholars have

highlighted their discomfort watching the plays. In *tucker green*, I have succinctly mentioned reparation as a key component of how the play engages with the spectator. Given the particular themes of the play, reparation takes a special and important meaning here. In the context of a queer reading practice, reparation is understood as a form of reading that brings together learning and action. This proposal, first sketched by Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling* (2003) is opposed to academic protocols of critical distance or the upholding of academic hierarchies and, as Siân Melvill Hawthorne argues,

[it] opens up the imagination to an anticipation of a different future and a different past, releasing us from the persistent paranoid imperative to fear the worst, to vigilantly patrol the territory we think we master but are in fact subject to. (2018, p. 159)

Yet, in the context of a play that interrogates the afterlives of enslavement and invites the white spectator to question their (our) responsibility towards it, reparation also takes another meaning. In the context of antiracist struggle, reparation, or rather its plural form reparations, refers to the act of making amends to redress the wrongdoings of enslavement, including restitution and compensations. In the case of *Alabanza*, the analysis has also focused on how the play subverts the normative distribution of comfort / discomfort amongst queer and non-queer spectators. One of the arguments I have made, which as previously stated is problematic, is that the willingness of white and cis spectators to engage with their (our) discomfort can contribute towards making queerer worlds, as long as this is not just paying lip service to progressive politics.

The discomfort white and cis spectators experience in both plays can be understood as an “ugly feeling”, which Sianne Ngai defines as minor and more politically ambiguous feelings which produce “ambivalent situations of suspended

agency” (2005, p. 1).¹¹⁶ In her writings about the political potential of discomfort, Andrea García-González defines the term as “an embodied signal that allows us to identify the violence in structures of power that we suffer and reproduce. Challenging patriarchal and colonial epistemologies, discomfort brings the corporality of emotions into knowledge production” (2022, p. 44). She unpacks these ambivalent situations Ngai underscores by drawing on her own experiences as a researcher, and concludes that a refusal to stay with discomfort risks reproducing and reinforcing the very same hegemonic divisions that have produced it, which in the context of academic research would result in forms of epistemic violence. In a similar reaction to my friend’s after a drag show, reviewer Alice Saville writes the following about Alabanza’s play:

Burgerz feels as though it comes from a place of frustration and anger – rightly, because no one should have to suffer the kind of violence that Travis has experienced. But it feels weird to target that frustration at an audience that’s primarily made up of queer people and straight allies who care enough to buy a ticket. (2019)

The reaction against being targeted reveals the discomfort experienced as a spectator of the play, one that is also present in the reviews of *ear for eye* that have already been discussed in Act Two. What these reactions have in common is a radical unwillingness to stay with and explore this discomfort, to the point that they end up reproducing the stereotype of the angry Black woman or the angry Black transfeminine person, which in this case becomes the angry Black playwright. Even in the case of Saville’s review, she attempts to give some space to this anger but quickly crushes it by accusing Alabanza of directing it to the wrong crowd.

Ultimately, these reactions become complicit in the very same structures of oppression that the condition of white / cis ally should contribute to dismantle. As García-González has stated, “[l]earning to explore discomfort allows us to identify the

¹¹⁶ I am indebted to my colleague Dr. Cristina Alsina for the connection between discomfort and Sianne Ngai’s theories on ugly feelings.

violence that is usually concealed in structures of power, and to identify our complicity and responsibility in sustaining that violence” (2022, p. 43). As a white and cisgender spectator and scholar, it is important for me to acknowledge, examine and crucially, stay with this discomfort too, so as not to drag myself into reproducing the very same structures of power I criticize. García-González describes this as a moment of *tambaleo* – Spanish for ‘stagger’ or ‘wobble’ – which she defines as “the continuous internal movement that appears when breaking dichotomies and navigating the lack of static truths and fixed certainties” (2022, p. 56). As per the author, allowing ourselves to be with the discomfort that results from “developing accountability in relation to our position in power structures” (ibid.) produces the movement of *tambaleo*.

One of most provocative and productive aspects she touches upon, and which is also present in Tiffany Page’s work on vulnerable writing to which I refer in the “Queer Method” chapter, is the fact that the moment of *tambaleo* is paired with a feeling of not-knowing, an outcome that challenges Western patriarchal and colonial understandings of science. As she puts it, “[t]he proposal from an epistemology of *tambaleo* comes from the understanding of the transformative potential of an ‘I don’t know’ as an answer” (2022, p. 44). Provocative as this might be, especially in the context of an academic study, I want to end this interval with the acknowledgment of not-knowing which comes after staying with discomfort. This is certainly a messy business, but simultaneously, the acceptance of not-knowing becomes the first precondition for learning, and perhaps the first step towards confronting our duty as white and cis spectators, and scholars.

6. Conclusions

This thesis, which has focused on a close analysis of forms of racial and gender terror in debbie tucker green's *ear for eye* and Travis Alabanza's *Burgers*, started with an interrogation on how to approach 21st century theatre on terror if we understand the latter as one of Ahmed's sweaty, embodied, concepts. Following terror around its less trodden paths within theatre studies has led towards a "reorientation to a world, a way of turning things around, a different slant on the same thing" (Ahmed, 2017b, p. 13). As such, the present study intervenes in 21st century analyses of contemporary British theatre and terror by displacing terror from its post-9/11 hegemonic framework. Thus, it has offered an analysis of contemporary forms of terror that does not replicate the grammar of the post-9/11 hegemonic narrative, while simultaneously allowing for the appearance of other unexamined forms within said narrative: racial and gender terror. The proposal to distort terror through queerness has allowed me, as I have explored in the first interval, to recognize these often-unexamined forms of terror that affect minoritarian subjects. In that regard, an important aspect of this study has been the interrogation on how to approach these plays as a white, cisgender scholar and spectator. In that sense, the analysis has privileged a reading that does not reproduce forms of epistemic violence, and as such, each play has been read within its own epistemic tradition. This opens new avenues of investigation to address the performance and representation of terror on stage in contemporary drama as it expands the languages available to discuss it that deviate from the epistemological frame of terror.

Act One has provided the theoretical and methodological frameworks of the thesis. Despite the will to displace the discussion on terror from the aforementioned hegemonic narrative, it has been necessary to devote the first chapter ("Terror") towards defining what this narrative is, so as to clearly identify how it was produced

and what were its consequences. As sustained in the state-of-the-art provided on the available studies on 21st century British theatre and terror, working only within the parameters of this narrative risks inadvertently reproducing it, by contributing towards the perpetuation of the connection between terror and post-9/11 forms of terrorism. The second chapter (“Queer as Method”) instead, has established the basis for what a queer methodology applied to text-based theatre studies might look like. In that regard, it has been important to offer a genealogy of recent queer studies – the period categorized as second-wave queer theory, including the apparent dichotomy between the antisocial thesis and the affective turn – to provide the reader with a brief understanding of how the seemingly antagonistic terms ‘queer’ and ‘method’ have paired up.

As has been seen, one of the most controversial issues in this regard is the unresolved question around the subjectless critique, a proposal that advocates for the displacement of queer studies to expand its field of enquiry beyond sexuality. While scholars such as Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz saw the subjectless critique as a key theoretical and political promise (2005, p. 4) – a suggestion reminiscent of Warner’s early proposals on how to make theory queer (1993, p. xxvi) – others such as Amin strongly suggest that queerness should not be freed from its affective histories (2016, p. 181). As I have suggested, Amin’s proposal is necessary but not short of problematic, given that in its drafting it privileges a very particular – US based, anglophone – canon for queer studies. Concurrently, it also fails to acknowledge how existing power structures within neoliberal academia impact the development of fields of studies beyond certain geographical contexts, as well as access to academically produced knowledge for less privileged communities in the global majority, who might be enacting queerness in a different way to that which the Anglophone context recognizes. Eng and Puar revisited the subjectless critique to further sustain its strength as a mode of enquiry which could question homonormative and homonationalist queer liberalist projects (2020, p. 3). As seen, this is an unresolved discussion within second wave

queer studies, the answer to which greatly surpasses the scope of this thesis; this notwithstanding, its inclusion in the methodology chapter has been important so as not to present a unified and unproblematic approach to queerness, but rather, acknowledge the differences within the discipline. As a provisional response to it – provisional in the sense of how to situate this study within the disciplinary differences – I have opted, following Heather Berg (2015, p. 23) for a tactical use of the subjectless critique. This has allowed me to identify a series of key principles within queer methodologies that have been used as entry points to access and analyse the plays, namely queer reading practices, messiness, livability, worldmaking, and finally, queer temporalities, a necessary final approach I have advocated for in the thesis first interval.

In that regard, one of the formal distortions afforded in this thesis has been the inclusion of two brief intervals, which has served several purposes. Formally speaking, these shorter interventions have been included to queer the form of the thesis, as a comment on how oftentimes in academia, queer studies have little space to *queer* the form of academic writing. But also, the interval is a nod to the theatrical interval; that space and time afforded in the theatre where to stand up, have a drink, eat some ice-cream, perhaps discuss briefly the first act if we are there with a companion, try to piece together what we have just seen and return with new expectations to the performance. While the first interval is more in tune with the two chapters that precede it, in that it offers the justification to use queerness as a method to distort terror – and as such functions as a space to think the two concepts together – the second one takes one concept, discomfort, and runs with it in another direction. In this sense, the first interval responds more to a need for coherence, that is, the necessity to create a space in the thesis to bring together theory and methodology, terror and queer, before the analysis of the plays. Yet, the second interval responds to a political need, that of making the researcher (myself) visible, through a discussion on how to engage with performances of racial and gender terror, and with analyses of racism and transphobia,

as white cis scholars and spectators, thus introducing a necessary reflection in the field of theatre studies.

As part of the thesis queer scavenger methodology, a multiplicity of sources has been used in order to expand the analysis of the plays, as well as provide an accurate approach to both text and performance. In regards to this, this thesis has offered the first combined analysis of tucker green's theatrical and filmed version of *ear for eye*. In the case of Alabanza, the analysis provided here is also innovative in that it takes into consideration not only the play (both text and several of its performances) but also a constellation of material produced by the playwright in the run to it and after its performance. This has included the short video *Burgerz and Chips with Travis Alabanza*, and most significantly, the archived recorded material of *Tranz Talkz*, as well as the *Tranz Talkz Vox Pops*, the content of which has been key for the definition of what constitutes gender terror as well as for the analysis of the play. The inclusion of the full transcription of these vox pops as an annex to this study, together with its donation to the Hackney Showroom archives, contributes towards making this content more accessible for a wider community of researchers, not only those interested in Alabanza's work, but also those interested in first-hand testimonies of what living in 21st century Britain is like for gender non-conforming people.

The chapter devoted to *ear for eye* expands from available studies on the Afrodiasporic connections within tucker green's work (Aston, 2020; Sawyers, 2020; Tyler, 2020) by incorporating into the analysis a close examination of the play's structure, as well as some of the elements that the film introduces. In that sense, the chapter has contributed to an existing line of study within the work of tucker green by providing a close analysis of other elements within her writing that can be incorporated to the already identified Afrodiasporic aesthetic heritage of her plays. With particular reference to the play's dramatic shape, I have provided a close examination of the many instances where loops, circles and juxtapositions are featured in the text, as well as in the film. This has been read as an example of the ubiquitous image of circles in

Afrodiasporic cultures as descriptors of Black radical imaginaries and, as Hartman suggests, anti-slavery philosophy (Bulley, 2020). The use of circularity has also been linked to the ways in which the disruption of teleologic temporalities contributes towards a project of Black worldmaking. The play's trinary structure has also been connected to Afrodiasporic spiritual traditions through the proposal to understand each of the play's parts as a different theatrical voice. This innovative suggestion has drawn from Tinsley's work on Vodou epistemology to suggest that, understanding the play as the juxtaposition of three different voices adds an extra layer of interpretation to the readings available, and makes visible the limitations Black women face in the theatrical landscape. The analysis has been further expanded by looking at the use of water in the film, which has been understood as a direct link to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In that sense, water represents the medium that is simultaneously responsible for Black death and modernity's birth.

The analysis provided also connects the play to the wider traditions of Black protest and the genealogy of Black struggle. In that sense, I have established a connection between tucker green and traditions of Black radicalism based on the play's content as well as on two of the visual additions the film provides. In terms of its content, I have tried to be cautious in ascribing such a strong political view to the playwright, yet, the many ways in which the text underscores the entrapment and oppression of Black lives within the current system suggest that the wish for a new system is part of the play's worldmaking project. Additionally, as previously discussed, the film's visual additions further allow this reading. Firstly, the play and film posters prominently feature the colours of the Pan-African flag – which is subsequently displayed in the film via the inclusion of a short animated clip. And secondly, the film includes a series of juxtaposed images of prominent members of the Black Panthers as well as other organizations from Black radical traditions. This notwithstanding, the relationship between the play and forms of Black radicalism is neither straightforward nor uncomplicated. As I have suggested, the discussions between younger and older

characters on the nature of protest need to be read as an examination of the contradictions within Black radicalism itself. As has also been stressed, the film's release after the killing of George Floyd and the resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement further stresses the connections between the text and the struggle for the recognition of Black lives as livable lives. Attending to the film's form further stresses this connection. In particular, as I have shown, the incorporation of the song "Ooh La La" by hip-hop duo Run the Jewels, as well as the juxtaposition of scenes from the play with images from the worldwide #BlackLivesMatter protests that took to the streets in 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The chapter on *Burgerz* has identified the particular form of terror experienced by Black transfeminine people as an example of transmisogynoir, thus stressing how the play not only comments on gender but also racial terror. An important contribution this chapter makes to the study of Alabanza is establish the importance and centrality of the archive in the playwright's promiscuous ethics and aesthetics of care. In that sense, I have suggested that in Alabanza's work the archive becomes an act of love and care towards gender non-conforming identities and simultaneously a strong criticism on the lack of presence and representation of trans lives in cultural productions. The constitution of this archive is achieved through the overarching presence of the burger, which functions as a signifier of gender terror – the cooking of the burger during the play is thus a constant reminder of the transphobic attack the playwright suffered – but also as a gesture towards trans and queer community bonds, as exemplified by the presence of burgers in both *Tranz Talkz* and *Burgerz and Chips with Travis Alabanza*.

The chapter also relies on Alabanza's connections to the drag community to cross-examine the play's relationship to queer temporalities. In that sense, it expands the meaning of temporal drag (Freeman, 2010) through a close reading of the moments in which the temporality of typical elements from drag shows is distorted – such as the reveal – or when the vocabularies of drag are altered – such as the play's playful engagement with the word mince. The study of queer temporalities within the play not

only provides the first approach to Alabanza's theatre through the study of its treatment of time, but is also connected to the play's use of memory's reparative capabilities (Castiglia & Reed, 2011). In that sense, I suggest that the use of memory through the constant revisiting of the transphobic incident paves the way towards repairing the present, but also the future, which is envisioned, hopefully, as more livable for trans and gender non-conforming people.

While each play has been analysed individually, several common elements have appeared that connect them beyond their non-hegemonic exploration of forms of embodied terror. Both plays centre experiences of terror by minoritarian subjects whose lives are oftentimes deemed disposable, and as such, unlivable and ungrievable, by hegemonic narratives. In both cases, these forms of terror are traced back to the advent of modernity and the responsibilities that the British colonial project had/has in their dissemination. In that sense, the chapter on *ear for eye* closely explores the colonial legacies of racial terror produced by whiteness while Alabanza's *Burgerz* draws on pre-colonial gender non-conforming identities to underscore how the binary gender system that upholds forms of gender terror can be traced to colonialism.

An important common element that further connects both plays is the unfinished nature of both projects. In one of the rare instances when tucker green has offered an interview, the playwright expressed how, contrary to what happened to her with previous projects, *ear for eye* left her with the sense that she was not finished with it, thus providing a direct explanation on why she decided to rewrite it for film. In Alabanza's case, the artist released the video *Burgerz and Chips with Travis Alabanza* in 2022, four years after the play's opening, as part of the Australian Midsumma Festival. The unfinished has been explored in the thesis as a further distortion to the hegemonic Western and straight temporalities the plays queer. Simultaneously, the fact that both playwrights have expanded the plays beyond their initial opening signals to the necessity to keep exploring and denouncing racial and gender terror respectively. Even if this provides a very negative comment on the state of contemporary Britain given the

rampant presence of racism and transphobia, there is a utopian impulse in both texts. As I have suggested, in both plays the importance of remembering and archiving is underscored as part of their drive to create new worlds.

The thesis final interval's focus on discomfort highlights one final element connecting both plays and interrogates the role and responsibilities of the cis white spectator and scholar. The rationale behind this final discussion engages with one of the elements from the queer methodology proposed, messiness. As suggested in the methodology chapter, queer methods have the capacity to reveal the often-obscured or apparently-distant figure of the researcher, and simultaneously underscore the messiness of so doing. I have chosen to further stretch the ways in which messiness is present in the thesis by also connecting it to the figure of the spectator – and as such, I have made myself twice visible. In the chapter on *ear for eye* I have discussed the ways in which the plays produce discomfort in the white audience, while in the one on *Burgersz* the focus has been on how the play alters the normative distribution between comfort and discomfort between cisheteronormative and queer audience members respectively. Rather than just stressing this fact, I have opted to follow recent queer and feminist scholars who advocate for staying with discomfort (García-González, 2022) as a productive way to challenge patriarchal and colonial epistemologies, as well as a way to avoid reproducing forms of epistemic violence against racialized and gender non-conforming individuals.

The unfinished nature of both theatrical projects opens up new avenues of research that expand on the ways in which non-hegemonic forms of terror have been silenced and obscured, and interrogate the responsibilities of white and cis scholars in the matter. As I am writing these words, Travis Alabanza's latest play *Sound of the Underground* has opened at the Royal Court theatre. In yet another display of the playwright's commitment to the queer communities that sustained them, the play pays homage to drag and queer cabaret artists and their art forms. The final act of the play takes place in what the Alabanza describes as a queer space – which is represented as a

pink fluffy palace-like room with satin drapery – a physical manifestation of the queer worlds that we need to make to avoid replicating the forms of terror both tucker green and Alabanza denounce, and that this thesis has evoked.

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8. Annex

TRANZ TALKZ VOX POPS

Transcribed by Elisabeth Massana (University of Barcelona)

This recorded material was accessed on the 14th of July 2022 at the Hackney Showroom (London, UK), thanks to the generosity of Nina Lyndon and Sam Curtis Lindsay.

Some quotes have been slightly edited for clarity.

CAMBRIDGE 1

What I would like a trans, gender non-conforming or nonbinary person to know in thirty years' time is that actually these are historical concepts. That it's a bit like, we all know that five hundred years ago people believed the earth was flat, and people who go across the spectrum in this way know that in the past people used to think that there were only two genders, or that gender was something that was fixed, and by that time, it will be as fluid and it will be as normal as we now perceive the Earth to be round. And we all know that, we take that for granted, that there is kind of a non-issue. And that is part of our history lesson. And that actually, because of the innovation and the courage of the people that have come before us and our generation now, we are creating a worldview that is more consistent and coherent, and actually makes more sense, because we all know that the Earth is not flat – if you walk too far you're not going to fall off the edge – as well as we know there aren't two genders, and also that gender is not fixed, and that becomes an obvious knowledge rather than something to be questioned.

CAMBRIDGE 2

I came here as an experiment. I've often felt that I haven't been nonbinary enough to come to spaces which are for trans and nonbinary people, and I think that's why this is so important, because it lets me not only voice those things but I also get confirmation that other people feel this way as well, and that's something that is really important to me and something I really gladly take away from this experience, so I am so grateful for it.

COVENTRY 1

Today I came to *Trans Talk* because I thought it would be nice to hear other people's experiences and see what it's like. Just to know that I'm not the only one that is going through this; and I think it's important because it's important to know you are not the only one going through it. You're not alone. Being trans around here is alright, I guess.

Coventry is full of accepting people, even though there are some people that aren't accepting and that will bully you, but that doesn't happen on a daily basis. Most people here are quite accepting.

COVENTRY 2 (three people in the clip)

[SPEAKER 1] We generally don't get a chance to talk to people who aren't our own age, and I think it's really important to be able to talk to people who are like us but in a different age group, which we don't get to do.

[SPEAKER 2] I live in Meriden which is ten minutes away. It is a small village so obviously it's not that friendly, there's not many other people there. But in Coventry it's a lot better, I feel a lot safer walking and being very visibly queer. It's alright.

[SPEAKER 3] I feel safe being out in public, but I think we should improve the security around different buildings, and have more police officers as well, so nobody can get attacked being who they are.

COVENTRY 3

I feel it is so important to document nonbinary trans lives or anybody who doesn't fit into a social norm because there's not a lot that is documented outside of London, like in the Midlands or the north. It's quite underrepresented in many ways, there's a lot of positivity, there's a lot of acceptance in London, but it's not always the case up here. I've personally have experienced it myself. There's not always that sense of safety, that sense of "I can walk down the street looking like I want to look". It's always more about how I will be deemed appropriate.

I don't necessarily feel safe outside. There's a sense of safety in numbers which is a sense I get when I go out with my friends, or colleagues, or a group of people where I might not be the centre of attention. But if I am going out on my own or to a place where I am running from errand to errand, client to client, local to local, it's quite daunting, in the sense that someone can look at you in a manner, or become quite aggressive with you. And I think the best way to tackle this nation-wide is through advertising, in the sense of "this is what it's like to be a trans individual", "this is what it's like to be someone out of the ordinary" and there needs to be more documentation – as we did today – but also more readily available advertising: leaflets, pamphleting [sic.]... there's a lot more work to be done.

COVENTRY 4

I came to *Tranz Talkz* today because the space of trans people getting together happens so rarely. For us to get together and talk to each other is so important. The ability for us to have in-group conversations where we don't have to explain ourselves, where we can find the commonalities amongst our experiences is vital. I was just speaking to someone else and we feel like we need to go and have a good cry now because the space of vulnerability and strength that came out tonight was just extraordinary.

LONDON 1

Do I edit myself when I go outside? I do more in the summer. I would not say I necessarily change anything, but I definitely think about it. This summer was very hot, so I wanted to wear shorts as much as possible, and I have very hairy legs, and that meant that even just walking out my front door I would immediately get looks. I think that editing wasn't necessarily changing how I was gonna dress, it was changing my mindset, and being aware that I'm gonna be stared at. It meant almost putting that armour within myself to make sure that those looks, those stares, those speculative looks more than anything else – is she

a girl, is she a boy – I think it was that what made me think, “ok, I’m gonna get looked at so I just need to ignore it.”

How do I feel outside? I feel speculated about. I feel stared at. I don’t feel anonymous as much as I want to. I think if I wanted to bring attention to myself that would be fine, and sometimes I do, but that’s my choice and I want it to be my choice and it’s not my choice. So, I think that’s the thing that I find more difficult about my presentation and my gender. And outside means I need to use a bathroom and that’s incredibly difficult. There is probably nothing as shameful as being in a female bathroom and having a mother hold her child as if she’s protecting that child from me. Or having people literally come up to me and say “you shouldn’t be in here. You’re a man”, and me having to open up my jacket or push up my breasts [they demonstrate it]. It’s a right that feels that is pushed upon me or taken away from me should I say. I shouldn’t have to justify my own presence in somewhere where all I want to do is take a wee, you know. And I think that’s the thing that I find more difficult about being outside in the world, because when I’m inside no one looks at me, obviously. And it’s the same within queer spaces, you can achieve a sense of anonymity which should just be a given and a privilege without having to ask to be given that.

LONDON 2 FILE IS MISSING

LONDON 3

In thirty-years’ time I feel like a lot of the advice that I have for a trans and nonbinary person is probably gonna be obsolete. I can’t tell you what websites you will be able to buy cross-sex hormones from. I don’t know which community centres will be open, or which spaces we are still gonna have, or even if the types of spaces we’ve got now are going to exist. But one thing I probably would say, specially to young trans people – although God

knows trans people can come out or figure out, or accept their transness or gender non-conforming nature almost at any age – is that if that feeling you have of being trans is persistent and insistent and consistent, in all likelihood, you know, you are probably trans and you should do something about it. You don't have to, there's no rush to, it's not an escalator where you need to get on and once you start following some steps of change you have to follow through. And I imagine in thirty years-time, hopefully, there will be a greater degree of acceptance and decent medical care, access to medication or to the pharmacological intervention so that you can be how you want to be... And I've lost my train of thought but if those feelings are there, you know, go for it as soon as you're able. And hopefully you'll be more able than we are now. It would be nice.

LONDON 4

I live really close to here, just up the road in Stamford Hill and I moved here because a lot of my friends already lived in this area, because it's quite a queer hub and there's lots of venues and lots of things going on in East London for queer people, in my experience more so than in other parts of London. The types of queer events and communities here are more those I fit in with. I think it's potentially safer here than in other parts of London, but I don't know... I feel like certainly on the main roads there's quite a lot of queer visibility and you will probably see either gay couples holding hands or just visibly queer people going about their lives in a way that I don't see... I come from Harrow in North West London and it's so suburban, I haven't seen that ever there. So, I think there's strength in numbers and there's more visibility here, and that probably makes it feel safer even if in reality it may not be.

In thirty-years' time I would want any trans or nonbinary or gender non-conforming person to know basically the same things that people kind of should be able to know and understand now: that it's perfectly legitimate to be whoever they are, and that there's no limitations on how they can identify. And I would want them to know that they are safe,

because I would want the reality to reflect that. At the moment we can try and be as safe as possible without really knowing it because that's just not the way the world is, so I would want that certainty around safety and legitimacy being just a given.

MANCHESTER 1

So, I am local to Manchester, I grew up in Wigan which is not far away from Manchester, and I now live in Manchester the city itself. And I moved here specifically because I knew it was a queerer friendly place than the town I grew up in. There was *Queer as Folk* on the television when I was in High School, there was Manchester's Gay Village which is sort of famously there, at least, and so I moved here because I thought it was going to be a safer place to transition. In terms of what it's like, there's a whole vibrant community, although it doesn't seem to be able to move past the whole "let's go out and get drunk and that's our culture, and that's our community and there's nothing else to it", but things are progressing and I wouldn't want to live anywhere else but Manchester now.

What I'd say to people in the future about how trans people are being treated now is – speaking here from the distant past – I hope it gets better. What I would tell people is that there is a lot of stuff being written and said about trans people here in this time and in this place, and most of it isn't even true. I think some people get a bit upset because it seems like trans people and LGBT movements generally might not have too much of a history. We do, it's genuinely there, it's vibrant, and in some cases, people have tried specifically to destroy it. But it is there, we exist, we have always existed, and we exist right now in 2018 and we always will. And I think, I hope things are better where you are.

MANCHESTER 2

When I go outside, I feel quite wrong. I feel that I have a body that is not the one that I would have wanted. But at the same time, I can't do much to change it. That's how I feel,

anyway. I feel exposed when I'm outside, and I feel like I'm hiding something. But I also enjoy it. I feel like a disease, like I'm infecting the normative world with my wrongness and I find that very exciting. And at the end of the day I really like myself, it's not that I hate my body or something. I could have had another body, but I don't, and that's ok. I feel very wrong, but it's nice.

MANCHESTER 3

I came to *Tranz Talkz* today for two main reasons. The first one is that I've really had almost an entirely positive experience since I've started living full-time female; and the second reason is because I have no trans friends, and it's made me start to think "Am I living in some kind of bubble? Have I just chosen where I go to stay safe? Am I missing out by not having any trans friends? Am I missing out on understanding what the risks are to me out there in society?" And I think it's important for me to meet lots of other trans people to at least get a feel of what other experiences people are having. I'm a naturally confident person, I don't hide away anywhere. I've just been down to London today in the train, came back, walked through Manchester. I don't have any bad experiences to call upon to make me afraid of what I'm doing. But when I read on the internet and I go on forums and I see a hell of a lot of people out there like me who are having a tough time, I think: "Is my bubble gonna burst one day? Am I gonna start to have bad experiences? What do I need to watch out for? What do I need to be weary of?" And that's why I'm here really, because I want to educate myself. My reality is my reality, it's nobody else's. I might just be lucky. I might just be having a bad experience in the future and I want to arm myself, prepare myself for what may come about.

MANCHESTER 4

Manchester for me has been generally very accepting. There are areas where I feel safe, and as long as I don't make myself too obvious or too garish, I've never had any problems there.

In thirty years' time I would like trans, nonbinary, any kind of genderqueer folk to understand that there has been a struggle, that things are getting better, and that if they are still having a struggle at that particular time, there is hope and they can make it through, in a very positive way.

OXFORD 1

When I go outside, it depends from time to time whether I edit myself. I'm nonbinary and I often find a pressure to present as binary, so sometimes I find that I need to edit myself to look more feminine, and more in line with what people think I should look like as someone who is brought up feminine, and mostly still automatically presents more feminine than masculine. Other times, especially if I'm going into queerer circles, I find that there's a pressure to look more masculine than I would naturally, because I feel that I need to present myself like a "proper trans person". So yes, I do feel like I need to edit myself, but that does vary depending on the situation.

OXFORD 2

I'm really excited to be in a room full of people who are like me but also have different experiences to me. I think that sometimes when you talk to the people that are really close to you, or if you reflect on your life quite a lot, you can get into one very distinct narrative of what it's like to be a trans person. But being in a room full of people who are trans, but have so many different experiences, different ages... it opened my eyes to what trans is like for a whole array of different people, and that was really, really lovely. And I think it's really important because these voices matter, and they need to be documented. And I think a lot

of the time, the media around us is controlled by people who aren't like us, and it's really lovely to hear it come from people who actually go through it, and who actually resonate with those experiences.

OXFORD 3

Things are already progressing so fast that I hope that really keeps going. I guess in thirty years I just want trans people to know that it was a really... silent time I guess, I wanna say. There's still a fear of having these conversations because people are scared of saying the wrong thing, people don't want to offend anyone. But also, I feel that there is a lot of resentment that some cis people have for trans people. And it means that today, having this dinner, this has been the first time that I've been in a room full of so many different trans people of different personalities, experiences, jobs... In the media trans people are seen as one thing. Being trans is a very political statement, but you really get no say in how you present yourself, that's always up to somebody else, and I think that's a very key part in being trans in 2018, this association to politics. I really hope that changes.

