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Biography

Lynne McCarthy is a lecturer at the University of East London. Her research is concerned with performance and people-property relations emphasizing cultural work's responses to the current UK housing crisis (2010-). She practically investigates state-led evictions through the project, *Soil Depositions*, dispersing soil from the Dale Farm eviction in Essex 2011. Her research has appeared in *Contemporary Theatre Review's* 'Interventions' and in *Research in Drama Education*. She is also a member of the feminist performance collective, *Speaking of IMELDA*, who have campaigned since 2013 for a national referendum on reproductive justice in Ireland.

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Focus E15: Performing nuisance as a feminist narrative of property

In 2014 Focus E15 resisted the evictions of young carers by drawing attention to the precarity of the London housing crisis (2010-). The campaign's local occupations protested the devastations of urban cleansing in the area of Newham and won them the 'right to stay put.' After, FocusE15 mounted a musical and verbatim theatre project staging the narrative of their protest, entitled, *The Land of the Three Towers* (2016). The production detailed how the political and feminist voices of the campaign emerged, and I argue not only as the metaphorical 'voices' for the mother's self-representation, but as the material through which they laid claim to property. This article discusses how Focus E15 challenged UK property regimes while illustrating the critical contribution of voice as a feminist strategy of resistance, and as a way of showing how property is tethered to performative vocal claims. I observe how nuisance featured as an activist strategy of the campaign elaborating on its meanings as a form of property disturbance and as a form of un-tolerated noise to identify how the mothers usefully politicised nuisance as a tactic to address their displacement. Finally, I argue that a feminist narrative of property unfolded across the political campaign and its subsequent theatrical staging.

Keywords: feminism, property, voice, nuisance, social housing, verbatim theatre.

In 2014 when a group of single mothers were evicted from the Focus E15 Foyer in Stratford, a recently-privatized, protected, accommodation site for pregnant young people, they collectivised against Newham Council's attempt to displace them to cities outside of London. In their use of public occupations to insist on their right to be housed locally, Focus E15 evinced a feminist narrative of property based on a communitarian notion of shelter for all within the context of London's housing crisis. They performed, wittingly or not, this narrative of property through tactics that included becoming a nuisance to their local council's property agenda and by rejecting the financialisation of urban housing as a wealth-producing instrument. This article explores how a feminist narrative of property was staged by Focus E15's female voices from the initial use of chanting to make the mums' presence politically visible to the subsequent representation of the Focus E15 campaign as a verbatim community theatre production. After Focus E15

secured the ‘right to stay put’, campaign members mounted a verbatim theatre project in which the narrative of their protest, entitled *The Land of the Three Towers*, was staged in the community hall on the Carpenter’s Estate in January 2016. In this theatrical representation, popular song was vocalized in polyphonic styles humorously personalising the events of the Focus E15 campaign and the initially dismissive responses of Newham Council to the mothers’ pleas against eviction.

The performative use of the female voice and its relationship to property regimes is the initial focus of this article. In situating the context of the London housing crisis and its effects on the Focus E15 mothers, I then establish how performative vocal claims might bring about property acquisition through public consensus, following the work of property scholar, Carol M. Rose, and evidence how this happened within the Focus E15 campaign. I articulate what a feminist narrative of property looks like and how it is undertaken through tactics of nuisance. Then I analyse how a critical emphasis on voice as a feminist strategy was amplified and elaborated in the verbatim production, *The Land of the Three Towers* (2016). As a form dependent on vocal testimony, I argue that verbatim can act as an amplification of the feminist voice and I analyse how themes of vocal ownership are provoked through the verbatim genre. Consequently, this is an examination of the application of voice by the campaign in two decidedly different contextual audio-spheres: as a performative in political contexts wherein its effects are unexpectedly fostered through nuisance, and in a theatrical sphere wherein the narrative of the campaign is legitimated through artistic media. I argue for, and elaborate understandings of the criticality of voice as a feminist strategy of resistance within property regimes.

The Focus E15 Campaign and London’s Housing Crisis

The concerns the E15 campaign voiced against Labour-led Newham Council resulted in significant media attention and was bolstered by the mothers’ protests and occupations of Newham Town Hall and the East Thames Housing Association (ETHA) culminating with a two-week occupation of the Carpenters Estate in Stratford (September 2014). Carpenters Estate had been appointed for demolition by the Council seven years previously but, the mothers contested that ‘nearly 2,000 [empty] properties on the Carpenters Estate alone could have been made available as homes almost instantly’ (Stone 2014). The Focus E15 campaigners were successful in their public address to

Newham Council and averted a relocation outside of London. Since, the Focus E15 campaign continues with a weekly stall informing residents in the Stratford area on housing issues, a drop-in housing advisory clinic called Sylvia's Corner and with flash protests in other London boroughs, such as the Sweets Way Estate in High Barnett where the cleansing of social tenants persists. Newham Council's recent history of social cleansing through policy that evacuated low-income earners from London boroughs to cheaper rental accommodation in other regions of England was criticised as early as 2012 when it was exposed that they had petitioned Stoke-on-Trent's council to receive 500 families from their jurisdiction (Campbell 2012). The campaign epitomizes and articulates the problems of property regimes in London at a time when many social tenants are facing enforced expulsion from the city and private renters, faced with increasing rental costs, are nudged to the fringes of the city or, are impelled to relocate to regions outside London (England 2014; Butler 2012; Foster 2016).

Exacerbated by the Global Financial Crisis (2007), the crisis in housing has been slowly recognized in recent years in UK broadcast media and at governmental level. In the UK it has manifested as uncontrolled private rents; in the withdrawal of the public provision of social housing; in misdirected incentives for private property developers who have 'land banked' or pre-sold developments to wealthy foreign investors (Minton 2016, 25-47), all leaving average and low-income populations with limited housing stock that is often substandard. The crisis is subtended by laissez-faire neoliberal policies from consecutive Labour (1997-2010) and Conservative governments (2010-) where unchecked landlordism and investment in private property has driven local prices up (Glucksberg 2016). The lack of regulation in landlord/tenant contracts has enabled rent rackateering with inflated annual rent increases but with little in law to protect tenants against substandard accommodation or evictions (Madden and Marcuse 2016). The state-led privatisation of social housing stock entitled housing associations to purchase older public housing at a trifle¹ of their real term prices (Ginsberg 2005) while receiving government subsidy through social tenant rents. The crisis has been addressed by groups such as Radical Housing Network, London Renters, HASL, Digs, 35% Campaign and

¹ Between 2000 and 2003 'the average price paid for the transferred homes was £6,600' and the lowest transfer price was exchanged in Glasgow at £310. (Ginsberg 2012).

latterly by the housing charity, Shelter, and is a felt concern for a majority of city-dwellers in London.

This crisis is representative of a class struggle because it is based on income inequality but, it also needs to be understood as an issue that intersects many social movements such as, those devoted to ethnicity, labour, feminism, LGBTQ, migrant and disability rights since, 'the severity of housing crisis impacts are determined by where one stands in relation to hierarchical configurations of class, race and to an extent gender, with generation also playing some role (Minton and Watt 2016). Scholarship illustrates how the term 'crisis' has discursively prompted the state, municipal and private actors to rationalise the provision of more private homes while removing council housing proving that the crisis has negative financial consequences for some, but not for wealthy developers, speculators and other professionals. Elmers and Denning from the activist campaign, Architects for Social Housing are unequivocal: 'Let us say again: London's housing "crisis" is not a result of faceless economic forces; it has been carefully prepared and legislated over a number of years to serve the interests and fill the pockets of those who benefit from it' (2016). While the housing crisis in London is an outrage because it persecutes so many on both low and middle-income scales, it also occasions a renewal of critical perspectives on solidarity and intersectionality.

The singularity of the Focus E15 campaign was in making issues of the private sphere public so that the self-interest underpinning property regimes in London were politicised. Analysing the housing crisis as an instance of 'privatised despair,' the *Guardian's* Aditya Chakraborty wrote of the campaign, 'for real politics don't look to parliament but to an empty London housing estate', justly questioning the rarefied stance taken by Westminster to low-income earners (2014). Chakraborty discerned how citizens like the E15 mothers became the civic force of 'dissensus' whose public argument on their right to shelter could simply not be confined to an individual 'private despair.' Rather, I observe, that the mothers succeeded in perforating a type of social habitus and a type of municipal regulatory organisation that depend upon the 'privatization of emotion' (Ahmed 2004). I argue that the collectivised action of the mothers highlighted the traditions upon which property is contingent, paradoxically showing up that whether property is private, social or held in the commons, it is an institution through which all populations are made interdependent. The mothers' situation

confronted the absolutes of property as an institution primarily focused on rights to the private and privatisation. I read the campaign as a plea for property's meanings to be focused more basically as shelter for all by pointing towards the possessive individualism of financial investment in property as assets rather than as homes, and the urban policies that enhance and facilitate this financialisation. Their words, taken verbatim from the *Land of the Three Towers*, evidence the often crude and sudden ways that evictions based on asset manipulation take place:

On the 20th August 2013, all 29 of Focus mums were issued with eviction notices saying that they had to move by 20th of October, and it was ridiculous because I was pregnant and my due date was the 19th of October.

We were told to look for properties ourselves and it was hard because we were all on benefits. Some people were like 'oh yes, we accept DSS', and they asked if we had children, and because we said 'yea', they said, 'No, we are not taking you.' We went to the Council but they officially registered us as homeless and offered us accommodation in Manchester, Hastings and Birmingham because there is no houses in Newham, and we was like, 'No! We know there is.'

Me and Sam called a meeting and 18 mums came. It was brilliant. We started off with a petition, just like a handwritten petition and got all our families to sign it and stuff. Then, when we were on our way to get it printed we bumped into the RCG (The Newham chapter of the Revolutionary Communist Group) who were handing out leaflets on the bedroom tax. We asked them how to get more people to sign the petition and they helped. And, we have been doing the Focus E15 stall with them every Friday since. There *are* loads of properties, I mean, just go down every single street and you will see at least one boarded up property (Stone in *The Land of the Three Towers*, 2016).

The testimonies of Jasmin Stone, prospected with eviction from the Focus E15 Foyer, were reprised in the opening sequences of the *The Land of the Three Towers*. Stone recalled receiving the letter and thinking that the eviction related to her specifically until she conferred with other residents in the Foyer. Foyers are a 1990s initiative of the homeless charity, Shelter, that offer 'affordable accommodation for young people, usually between the ages of 16 to 25, who are homeless or in housing need, and want to develop skills and prepare for living independently' (Shelter 2016). The Foyer at Stratford was hosted by East Thames Housing Association (ETHA) and contained 210 single

person flats (Butler 2013). Some of the Mums had remained at the hostel for two years after their pregnancy while they awaited appointed social housing describing the accommodation as ‘so stressful, so claustrophobic...if you put your arms out you could touch both walls’ (*Land of the Three Towers* 2016).

Focus E15 received its funding through the Supporting People Budget which, was cut by Newham Council in 2013 in response to the Conservative government’s (2011-) austerity policies (Twinch 2013). The cuts were subsequently imposed on ETHA who responded that they ‘had no choice but to withdraw all support services for the women’(Butler 2013). At the time of writing, ETHA was a branch of Triathlon Homes, ‘a joint venture between the private and public sector’ whose other partners included Southern Housing Group and the ‘urban development and investment company,’ First Base (Triathlon 2016). Triathlon Homes’ commercial interests in Stratford and over a swath of South England were significant; they owned and developed the Olympic Athlete’s Village, now renamed East Village, which at the time of writing advertises a three-bedroom private rental property for £600 a week compared with £462 a week private rental in other parts of Stratford (East Village London 2016). While Triathlon are at the forefront of gentrification in the Olympic legacy, contributing to the rise of local rents in the Stratford area through the private activities of their companies, they simultaneously provide mixed housing (affordable and social) in Stratford through the East Thames Housing Association. They therefore act as a cause of gentrification by squeezing low-income rents out of the area while ambivalently offering remediation in the provision of limited social housing priced at 80% of market rates. Although the Mums at Focus E15 rightly centred their campaign on Newham Council, I propose that the role of housing associations in this situation was left unexamined.

Triathlon Homes is exemplary of the housing association model in the UK and reflects the changing status of social homes from state-owned property to private property since the late 1980s (Smyth 2012; Nygaard 2007). There are several disadvantages for social tenants under the association model. Firstly, Registered Social Landlords have the power to enact anti-social behaviour orders since 2003 and can, thereby, discipline their tenants in ways that have ramifications beyond the home and into schooling and employment. Secondly, social housing does not offer security of tenure and the risk of eviction is higher for tenants who fall into rent arrears. Thirdly, because social housing is based on private investment it takes on ‘commercial risks’, which inevitably means that it is insecure in nature (Glucksberg 2016). This is also a concern for the HCA (Homes

and Communities Agency), whose report, *Protecting Social housing assets in a more diverse sector: A discussion paper on the principles for amending the regulatory framework for social housing in England* (2013), states that ‘it’s unacceptable that tenants – including some of the most vulnerable members of society – could lose the protection of being in a regulated sector as a result of commercial risks taken by providers’ (2). To complicate the situation, and because government subsidy for social housing had been withdrawn, housing associations are allowed to pursue mixed interests, which means they can generate capital through pursuits that are not related to the provision of social housing, such as investment. Triathlon Homes is a company composed of discrete pursuits; while two arms of the company are social and mixed housing providers registered as not-for-profit providers, First Base is an entirely private investment company. The HCA raised a penetrating question on the merging of public and private interests:

to what extent is it appropriate to risk the 2.5 million homes in the social housing sector in the pursuit of potential gains in other non-regulated activity, even if the profits from such activity (if there are any) might be reinvested in social housing? (HCA 2013, 12).

Performing Nuisance

In their proclamations around their need for shelter and property, the mums appeared to be initially received by Newham Council as a nuisance. The connections between nuisance as a form of property disturbance and as a form of un-tolerated noise were usefully politicised and subverted by the mothers as a tactic to address their displacement. The socio-legal scholar, Mariana Valverde, understands that nuisance laws are still used in the governance of space and urban conflict and are established on the basis of ‘disharmony’ when a ‘thing or activity is moved from its proper place’, making nuisance the ‘product of a particular social, aesthetic and geographic context’ (Valverde 2011, 294). Applications of nuisance law make literal that property relations are also social relations since ‘people, things and spaces are governed through use’, and in addition to the ‘known operation of governing through legal categories of personhood and group identity’ (Valverde 2005, 37). The sentiments prevailing in nuisance law were the same sentiments underscoring Newham Council’s attitude to the single mothers as a group of

low-income women who were continually denounced and unwelcomed in public and private places or, were removed from those places. What makes nuisance law seem unrelated to social control is its indirect means of controlling behaviour through the organization of space; however, in Valverde's analysis nuisance law tends to regulate social groups on the basis of class or income more expediently because of its oblique functions, thereby concealing its prejudice in playing 'a constitutive role in the construction of culturally specific collective subjectivities' (Valverde 2011, 295).

Consequent to their occupation of the Carpenters Estate in September 2014, the impending displacement of the Focus E15 group was discussed at Newham Council's chamber meeting in October 2014. On arrival, the mothers were refused entry to the Town Hall chamber to witness the discussion of their case on the basis that its public gallery was undergoing renovation but, the group cannily began to film the event (Focus E15 2014a&b). In much of their campaign, the group used social media for evidence of their situation and reasoned this to MP, Lyn Brown, that unrecorded private conversations achieved no results (2014c). Much like a court room, a council chamber is a democratic public space that is accessible to the public. It is left ambiguous whether spatial regulation –the use of health and safety policy in limiting access to a public gallery under renovation - was forethought as an obstruction to the group's presence but, the subsequent manhandling of the upset residents out of the Town Hall appeared to invalidate the legitimacy of the group. Taken together, it cannot be deduced that the treatment of the mothers as 'specific collective subjectivities' was intentional yet, for those who see the footage it is plausible to interpret it in this way. The removal of the group from the premises suggests that the mums were perceived as a nuisance, rather than as residents of Newham who had legitimate claims. Making use of their right to remove people from private property, the Borough were able to evade in these moments a direct account of their intentions for the mum's demands.

On a separate occasion in the same month, Focus E15 met the Labour Mayor of Newham, Sir Robin Wales, who, according to a member told them, 'I think it's disgusting what you are doing' (Watt 2016, 305). The indignant Mayor's response to a plea for shelter illustrated how social cleansing was becoming a morally permissible policy of London's local governance. The Mayor's parting words to the homeless mothers and, which, subsequently became a chant for the campaign and a choral feature of the *The Land of the Three Towers* was, 'if you can't afford to live in Newham, then you can't afford to live in Newham' (*Land of the Three Towers* 2016). In other instances, the

mothers protested at public events, such as Newham Fare, a summer carnival for people of the borough that attracts up to 2,500 visitors (Newham Council 2018), directly addressing Robin Wales on his housing policy. Wales' responded derisively by ordering the group to leave the fare (Focus E15, 2014). These statements, among others suggesting the mothers did not 'know their place' (Watt, 316), began a parley between Newham Council and Focus E15. Addressed in opposing styles, the mothers used song, chanting and occupation; the Council defensively used the physical removal of the mothers from public council meetings but, later capitulated to an apology made by Robin Wales through the newspaper, *Guardian*, pressured by mounting public opinion (Wales 2014). The mother's rightfulness to property in London was thereby judged around their public articulations and framings of their needs, and in turn they enacted their rights to property by establishing a narrative around their claims. The signs and slogans of the campaign enhanced this strong narrative; 'social housing, not social cleansing', 'these homes need people, these people need homes', 'social housing is a right, here to stay, here to fight' and 'this is the beginning of the end of the housing crisis.' In vocally defending their eviction from Focus E15 Foyer, the mothers successfully staved off their displacement from London.

Voice Production, Gender and Class

I position the mothers' vocal presentation as a feature of the campaign that, despite the immaterial qualities often attributed to voice, was used as a substantive force in their claim to property. Voice has been described by Maggie Inchley as the material that produces sound and language, as a means of communication and as a metaphorical voice of 'symbolic presence' in political discourses (2015, 1). British politics in the New Labour era (1997-2010) encouraged the voices of marginal identities and youths as a mode of inclusion into British citizenship. To have permission to speak represented both a 'civic right and a symbolic freedom' (Inchley 2015, 3), policies that were pervasive in the years that the Focus E15 mothers grew up. Inchley's notion of symbolic presence as a political conceit that registers the inclusion of undermined populations and as a sign of vocal empowerment is relevant to the class and gender of the Mums. However, the political concept of vocal empowerment that was current in public discourses until 2011, was not necessarily realizable as political effect. Moreover, according to Inchley, the advent of the Conservative government (2011-) erased the voices that were included in

the New Labour era as the ‘feral underclass’ (Ken Clarke, Conservative Party Conference, 2011).

Nancy Fraser’s (2013) feminist argument challenges ‘symbolic reproduction’ as feminine and ‘material reproduction’ as masculine. Combining Inchley and Fraser, then, it is possible to consider the extent to which not just women, but the female ‘voice’ is viewed primarily in symbolic terms and particularly in political spheres. Symbolic reproduction has been assigned to women, according to Nancy Fraser, as they are evacuated from the public sphere and assigned to the private space of the home. Fraser’s argument arises as a critique of Habermas in that she posits the public sphere as generally un-gendered, but fundamentally composed through androcentric thought. Fraser perceives the absence of women from public spheres –consider the low numbers of international female leaders– as an effect of female labour being configured through state and official economy systems as immaterial, and therefore, as a type of symbolic reproduction. Men produce in public spheres and in the domains of the state and official economy. Material reproduction is distinguished from the symbolic in that it is underpinned by a social labour that is produced and reproduced through rational systems and takes form as waged labour that circulate in inherently male-situated labour markets. Women reproduce at home or in less visible spheres making female labour reproductive and symbolic rather than productive. The female voice is also received in the public sphere in the form of symbolic reproduction rather than as effective production. The historical silencing of female voices has coincided in political spheres as a reasoning that females could only have a ‘symbolic presence’ (Fraser 2017, 19-53). Female voices are heard, but not necessarily enforced, a point made conspicuous in the contemporary need for a 50:50 parliament campaign in the UK. The female voice and its putative symbolic presence was troubled by the mothers of Focus E15 in their insistence that their material needs, as much as their symbolic presence –as the identity of homeless single mothers– were met.

As the mothers sought help against their eviction, they found that ‘the council had changed its allocation policy for council housing such that greater priority was given to those in paid work as well as ex-servicemen and women’ (Butler 2013). The segregation of social needs in these terms interpolated the mothers in a way that summoned their gender identities because it illustrated how the council were operating to instill the feminisation of poverty by focusing on the needs of putatively more deserving social groups. The council’s ideology, although, not explicitly directed against women, took a

gendered and classed view of the housing issue. In her consideration of how social class is 'emotionally mediated' and cast through caricature figures like single mother, Vicky Pollard (*Little Britain* 2003-2005), Imogen Tyler asserts that the terms 'underclass' and 'chav' offer political classes a means to cynically circumvent dealing with class relations. Instead, 'the chav mum represents a thoroughly dirty and disgusting ontology that operates as the constitutive limit for clean white middle class feminine respectability' (Tyler 2008, 22). By identifying the women as single, young and indigent carers, the presupposition was that they were not worth listening to, for instance, as the noticeable outlook of Robin Wales when confronted by the carers at Newham Fare. The group's use of a loud speaker to retort to the Mayor publicly at the fare was a rebuttal to his previous pronouncement that, 'if you can't afford to live in Newham, then you can't afford to live in Newham.' Politically expedient for the Mayor to rubbish the group's claims in that instant, he stated that they were disrupting the fare as a 'family day,' inferring that single mothers were not an acceptable form of family. To make a nuisance of a subject like a single mother is to address them as not just out of place, but without value for a given context such as, the way the Mayor invoked the class and gender of the mothers.

Feminist Narratives of Property

One way in which the mothers persisted was through the use of loud speakers to literally amplify and elicit concern from third parties who would read their plight as identifiable and coherent. Focus E15 self-actualised their subjectivities by using their voices publicly, showing themselves to have agency. I argue that the Focus E15 Mums used their voices to instantiate their needs through the force of vocal empowerment. Additionally, the mothers claimed their symbolic political voice and a sense of authority from their various uninvited interventions. Carol M. Rose's (1994) study on property and persuasion focuses on the rhetorical aspects of property relations and how they are performed. In order for a rightful property exchange to occur it has to be witnessed, according to Rose. Ownership becomes possible when a person is seen to make a claim on property, but moreover, the purpose of a witness is to illustrate that there is an agreed public consensus about a property transfer (Rose 1994, 37-57). These contractual property acts are performative; buying, selling, occupying and possessing are all matters of persuasion, and Rose contends that 'defining' and 'defending' property always requires a narrative (37-57). 'I own' this property is a performative act but also requires a narrative around why a person

should be enabled to subsume property for their private interests. Enlarging Rose's performative theory of property to the precise kinds of narratives that support female urban ownership is a project wider than I can offer here, but the situation of Focus E15 in East London shows on what authority they can make the enforceable claim, 'I own' or, 'I occupy.' In the case of Focus E15, a feminist narrative of property emerged and one that used public arenas to insist on the decolonising of property as spaces purely for wealthy subjects. Focus E15 identified a viable means to translate vocal empowerment into political effect by invoking a performative and unrelenting resistance that persisted to the level of nuisance against their attempted displacement.

A feminist narrative of property, I claim, could move towards a communitarian rather than a liberal individualist approach. Property is a social relation not often recognized as such because it is reified as a physical object rather than seen as the 'social contract' it is, where 'one is not so much purchasing the right to use [something] so much as the right to prevent others from using it' (Graeber 2001, 9). This social aspect of property is further characterized by questions of who has the democratic right to own, occupy or possess and, who is *de facto* enabled to do so because a right *to* does not equate to a materialization of property ownership. The prevailing social bonds tying private property to human rights privilege the individual over a collective concern for the equal distribution of shelter and are at the 'centre of almost all contractual [liberal] theories of government' in the global north (Harvey 2014, 40). That individual rights supersede collective rights is a liberal manifestation of property (Fraser and Lacey 1993). Traditionally liberalism favours state non-intervention in the private sphere, but thwarting this conception the campaigners made explicit how state non-intervention is equally as political in its dereliction of duty. In making matters of the private sphere public, for instance, by objecting to how people are housed as a matter of political importance, the mothers performed a classic materialist feminist move against liberal individualism and its separation of private and public spheres. Focus E15 framed their dispossession by the council in terms of their subject positioning as single mothers in order to dispute how liberal democracy enables certain classed subjects of property but, disenables others. Focus E15 emerged, announcing a feminist suspicion with the state's intervention in

private economic practices - in the sale of public housing stock on the Carpenters Estate
- at the expense of protection for a general social welfare.

Vocal Reproduction and the displaced sign: The Land of the Three Towers

The critical use of voice in the campaign and as a feminist strategy of resistance was elaborated in the production, *Land of the Three Towers* (2016), the verbatim theatre project undertaken by members of the campaign, and marking two years after their first occupation of the Carpenters Estate - where the performance also took place. *The Land of the Three Towers*, the title a reference to the landmark towers of the Carpenters Estate visible from multiple sightlines in Stratford, was devised by campaign members Emer Mary Morris and Nina Scott in collaboration with the mothers and homeless members of the campaign. The narrative chronicled the plights of the mothers with Newham Council and used the thematic chanting and song visible in the campaign. Residents on the Carpenters Estate were represented in the performance but, also appeared as their selves in an open mic interlude when songs written during the occupation of the estate were reprised. Popular music and polyphonic vocal arrangements were the forms used to narrate the inequities facing single mothers through urban bureaucratic councils and, visibly staged live musicians and vocalists supported the performers' devised song. Lyrics were directly sourced from verbatim testimonies collated by Morris and Scott from film footage loaned by the many film-makers recording the campaign as it unfolded (Morris 2017). The intonations of the mums were boldly noted in popular rhythmic metres; 'like you know, like, like, you know.' Morris had been involved in the Carpenters Estate occupation and had used the same techniques as artist Andrea Luka Zimmerman when she boarded up windows with the photographs of displaced residents on the Haggerston Estate, London, in her project, *I am Here* (2009-14). The audience was composed of the few remaining residents at the Carpenters Estate who had supported the campaign, and those who were made aware of its programming through Camden Peoples Theatre festival, *Whose London is it Anyway?*, an artistic exploration of local troubled property markets and access to them in 2016. The Focus E15 theatre project relevantly situated the problems of property for women and, more significantly, was made by women. The production claimed feminine symbolic reproduction as feminist by underscoring the political nature of the female voice and its material achievements

throughout the campaign in winning the ‘right to stay put.’ I argue here that verbatim can act as an amplification of the feminist voice and that themes of vocal ownership – so intrinsic to the verbatim genre – are neighbouring concerns with a feminist narrative of property.

The adhoc stage in the community hall at Carpenters Estate was styled from the artefacts of the campaign with banner slogans reading, ‘social housing is a right, here to stay, here to fight,’ and was strongly reminiscent of the aesthetics of industrial action. This DiY scenography was crafted by the campaign with their partners, the Revolutionary Communist Group, while the readymade aspects of the scene signified the interior of a home with standing lamps, armchairs and children’s toys. *The Land of the Three Towers* served as a reminder of the strong historical function of theatre as agitational propaganda in the UK through theatres such as Unity, Workers Theatre Movement and Hackney Peoples Players during the 1930s with their powerful links to workers’ rights and antifascist movements. *The Land of the Three Towers* toured to other housing estates in London earmarked for social cleansing in late 2016, such as the Silchester Estate (under threat of demolition and sister estate to Grenfell Tower, which was the scene of a horrific fire in 2017) and Cressingham Gardens (under imminent threat of demolition by Lambeth Council). Agit prop cultivates content of educational and ideological concern, speaking to ‘people’s own experiences of life’, according to a member of Hackney Peoples Players, while ‘dramatiz[ing] their troubles and, present[ing] them with ideas’ (Jackson 2007, 70). Its re-emergence coheres in global settings of political fragility and disorientation at the dominance of post truth news. Until the fire at Grenfell Tower, the housing crisis and its severe impact on social tenants had not been taken up seriously by mainstream media in the UK, giving Morris and Scott ample reason to chronicle it through devised performance. Agit prop tells and relays verifiable information through an oral rather than a literary dynamic, and shares in many ways the characteristics of verbatim theatre as well.

Land of the Three Towers’ self-proclaimed use of verbatim theatre and subject testimony archived the political production of voices in the campaign and in submitting the narrative to theatrical form also worked to legitimize, not unproblematically, the campaign. Because verbatim is constructed with non-theatre experts, witness or community testimonies, it has been criticized over ethical concerns of intellectual property. Commentators (Stuart-Fisher 2011; Bottoms 2006; Forsyth and Megson 2009) have subsequently questioned the transparency of verbatim theatre in simply presenting

other voices as ‘authentic’ since skillful selections, omissions and re-positionings camouflage editorial methods that discretely implicate an authorial voice. Moreover, verbatim theatre productions are often emphasized through their association with well-known billed playwrights. Verbatim representations of the housing estate are historically nuanced with the ‘burden of representation’ (Beswick, forthcoming). The housing estate and ‘the kinds of working-class stories offered a platform’ in established venues are perceived by Katie Beswick, as ‘not necessarily those stories that most urgently need to be told, but those stories that are understood to be the most palatable, marketable and entertaining to the presumed (middle-class educated) theatre-going audience who finance ticket sales’ (89, 2019).

While verbatim theatre scholars rightly elaborate the complexities of ‘authorial authenticity’ (Beswick, 99, 2019) within a classed context, I suggest that verbatim can also dynamically dislocate voices. The privative effects of displaced female voices is the focus of Inchley’s discussion of the play, *Nirbhaya* (2015), written after the gang rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey in 2012. Inchley’s critique is that ‘testimonies are often displaced into spaces and contexts far from the sites and circumstances which provoked them,’ (2016, 278) a point I accept in that work. Yet, *Land of the Three Towers* evidenced a feminist solidarity that was dependent on displacement (the substitution of a witness for a performer) as a form of amplification that publicly repeated and affirmed the Mum’s testimony. The ironic dislocation of the mothers’ actual voices functioned through the theatrical techniques of repetition, amplification and proliferation. Theatre easily dislocates voices because, as we know, theatre’s significations are already displacements of signs from elsewhere. In this way theatrical representations are aligned with Fraser’s identification of what androcentric thinking deems to be feminine symbolic reproduction because in the reproduction of cultural meanings signs are generative, diffused and unstable. Theatre serves as a perpetual reminder that a performer is only ever standing-in for someone else with the effect of ‘ghosting’ (Carlson, 2001; Raynor 2006) - the idea that an originating offstage presence is always implied on the stage. I propose that in the context of the Focus E15 campaign that this theatrical dislocation runs counter to the negative effects of the physical displacement of people from property. The mothers of Focus E15 may not have been literally present on the stage of *Land of the Three Towers*;

however, the performers standing-in for them amplify and expedite the political reproduction of their voices.

Conclusion

As I write, the members of Focus E15 are rehoused in temporary accommodation in Newham while the council seeks a more permanent solution to their shelter. While not fully achieving safe, affordable and permanent housing, what the mothers more precisely contested about property regimes in London was the dominant norm that ‘private property establishes an exclusive ownership right to a thing or a process whether it is being actively used or not’ (Harvey 2014, 39), and they insisted that vacant out of use council property could not be justified when so many in their borough needed access to shelter (Focus E15, 2014). The mothers questioned how resources were allocated and their occupation of the Carpenters Estate proved that property rights are ‘socially situated’ and controvertible (Harvey 2014, 40). Because they were grouped in solidarity, their claims echoed more substantially and they made a compelling case that a group right to property is as critical as an individual right to property. However, in pressing community rights over individual rights to property, and by showing this in their public squatting of the Carpenters Estate, Newham Council reciprocated by addressing the young carers as a nuisance. Hence, a feminist narrative of property looks like a nuisance because it needs to infringe upon normative property rights in order to show injustice in the allocation of resources. Finally, the use of political voicing as a nuisance and the use of theatrical voicing as a means of legitimizing the campaign coalesced on the basis of a feminist narrative of property. This narrative was a relentless issuing of demands that became a strategy and a means of instantiating a female property discourse against dominant property regimes in London.

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