

'Challenging the 'Othering' of the Male Adolescent: A historic perspective on representations of precarity and social dystopia'.

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In this paper, I will wish to develop a perspective on male adolescent identity and its representation in theatre that responds to ideas of precarity, of social and intergenerational crises brought about by a perceived collapse in neo-liberal capitalist systems. I am particularly interested in how discussing adolescence within a historical perspective can help to generate new ways of interpreting and taking action against the well-documented social problems we engage with

The 'we' here includes academics and teachers who, at this institution and elsewhere, work with young people who live complex lives and for whom transition to adulthood carries a number of challenges, to do with debt, employment and emotional well-being.

Writing in The Drama Review issue on Precarity and Performance TDR

56. 4. 5 (2012), Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider introduce

precarity as follows:

‘Precarity is life lived in relation to a future that cannot be propped securely upon the past. Precarity undoes a linear streamline of temporal progression and challenges ‘progress’ and ‘development’ narratives on all levels. Precarity has become a byword for life in late and later capitalism – or, some argue, life in capitalism *as usual*.’

Conditions of precarity demand a revision of the relationship between current contemporary crises and ways we think about the past. As Ridout and Schneider point out: ‘The secure ‘past’ upon which a future had once been balanced turns out not to been a very deep past, after all, but more of a respite from a precarity that is basic to capitalism as such.’ 6

They also present precarity as an implicit condition of capitalism, capitalism *as usual* or, quoting Angela Mitropoulos: ‘Capitalism is precarious, and normally so’ (Mitropoulos 2006).

Drawing on this interpretation, I want to question the notion of a contemporary crisis of adolescence in an age of 'precarity' as unprecedented.

I want to identify firstly, ways in which historicising male and youth identities - for example, linking contemporary rhetoric to early twentieth-century theories of adolescence – can uncover continuous values that still impact on the representation of the urban young.

Secondly, I want to discuss – and speculate about to a degree – what I identify as a historic turn in treatments of the young by contemporary dramatists, in particular among Black British writers– a development that potentially opens up new directions for thinking about how adolescence is represented in British theatre and society.

PROBLEMATISATION

First of all, I'd like to problematise the idea of adolescence and offer some working definitions to take forward - Even though my recent

research has demonstrated anything that adolescence is as complex to theorise as it is for many of us to experience.

I begin with a perspective from Finn Kennedy.

Fin Kennedy is a successful playwright whose career spans work at Soho Poly Theatre and as an artist-in-residence at the Mulberry School, East London, producing five plays with young people that include an Edinburgh Fringe First-Winner.

He has also written extensively on young people's participation in theatre in twenty-first century Britain.

Discussing the ecology of early twenty-first century theatre he comments:

One of the characteristics of my generation (that is, people in their 20s) has been a tendency to favour style over substance. Yes, we are very cool. But we have been depoliticised. The irony of our situation is that, despite holding the dubious honour of being the most globalised

generations to date, the culture of individualism on which this is based (hammered into us during our Thatcherite adolescence) has robbed us of any sense of interconnectedness. We don't discuss ideologies. We rarely vote. We rarely look beyond the boundaries of our own lives.

Our theatrical output often reflects this: stylish plays about youngsters going awry, but with little sense of a world outside. We struggle to dissect the bigger socio-political backdrop that might hold the reasons for their, and our, predicament. Our plays are as alienated from their political context as we are from politics itself. And that suits the vested interests that manipulate us just fine. (Kennedy, 2004)

HOW DO I WANT TO DISCUSS ADOLESCENCE? KEY POINTS

Kennedy's critique raises important questions about the experience of adolescence within late capitalist societies, about the depoliticization and alienation of the young and its representation – and also about ways it is theorized. Kennedy engages with a key challenge I want to engage with here, as an applied drama practitioner, a desire to 'dissect the bigger socio-political backdrop'.

Kennedy's critique of stylish plays resonated with my own reaction to what I perceived as the demonisation of the urban young in a series of plays about knife crime in the early 2000s or in the In Yer Face theatre that represented the urban young as emblematic or agents of social dystopia.

Kennedy's characterisation of a Thatcherite adolescence prompted a number of questions about the ideas of constants and variation in ideas of adolescence and ways that adolescent identity could be theorized.

Contemporarising this – and thinking again about this notional depoliticisation of the young – fast forward to the student protests of 2010 by a generation younger than Kennedy, and the rises in youth participation in political movements (for example in the Scottish referendum vote and in numbers joining the Labour party in 2015). This perspective troubles Kennedy's early twenty-first century view of the young as depoliticised or disengaged from socio-political discussion.

Of course, I am discussing very different social experiences of adolescence here – but in seeking to identify continuities or identifiable parameters of identity, this is a necessary problem to engage with.

To what extent do varied social experiences in different periods allow the identification of continuities and common reference points to discuss the representation of male adolescence? Is it possible to speak of adolescent identity at all, or of continuities in social experience and ways this is interpreted?

DEFINING ADOLESCENCE

THEORY

Sociological perspectives that question whether meaningful distinctions between adulthood and childhood can exist within contemporary societies such as Neil Postman's work *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1994) – identify conceptual difficulties of speaking of adolescence in non-stable societies where traditional markers, rites of passage, between generations have to a large extent been erased. More recent discussions, such as those of Arjun Appadurai, of youth identities in a

period of globalisation emphasise the difficulties of transmitting values between generations in societies that are subject to increased flows of capital and migration.

Sociological perspectives also identify specific historic discourses and contexts which continue to shape contemporary understandings of adolescence.

My intention here is to illuminate what cultural theorist Jonathan Arac describes as the 'geological strata', some of the antecedent interpretations that underpin our critical ideas. (1987:3). I am interested in particular how anxieties of a highly capitalised age for a lost pre-industrial social order – and I think this can be connected to ideas of dispossession - were instrumental in the adoption of new systems of restraint for the young.

OUR IDEAS OF ADOLESCENCE WERE FORMED ONLY RECENTLY.

Recent social histories, in particular Jon Savage's *Teenage* have charted continuities in the social identities and practices of contemporary

teenagers with the emergent youth class of the late nineteenth century – looking at fashions and so called ‘gang’ formations on the street.... He identifies great flux in how this class has been described since but also maps the early twentieth century as a critical period for the our contemporary understandings of this term.

Historian, John Springhall’s study identifies ‘youth’ as the most commonly used Victorian word to describe the period between childhood and adulthood until the 1880s when ‘adolescence’ began to be used (1986:1). John Neubauer similarly identifies the term as only entering the major Western languages in the late nineteenth century (1992:5). These early twentieth-century meanings of adolescence were led by theories of biological determinism and linked to new systems of control for the young, as historian John Stevenson describes:

The years around 1900 have been identified by some as the period when the conception of ‘youth’ as adolescents, at a particular stage in biological, psychological and social development, became fixed. In this process the polarization of delinquent and disciplined youth became well established and with it the idea of youth organizations to channel young people into suitable recreations. (1984:143)

SCOUTS

A key influence in this 'fixing' of adolescence were the theories of G. Stanley Hall who put forward a comprehensive argument for the regulation of the adolescent body and sexuality. Hall brought together late-nineteenth century social pre-occupations that associated adolescence with the detrimental effects of mass industrialisation and argued for a retrieval of 'natural' influences. The discursive hallmarks of his ideological construction of adolescence can still be identified in contemporary research texts particularly within the field of medicine and health(p.197).

Increased legislation and reform movements were also driven by fears of the urban young, newly affluent as an independent class but also challenging nostalgic views for a lost arcadia when young people were firmly in their place, subordinated to authority and bound tightly by affective relationships to family and community.

The 'fixing' of adolescence can therefore be understood as leading to a greater emphasis on Romantic notions of a retrieval, of a 'lost' social

order and a Rousseauesque renewed emphasis on nature, on disciplining the adolescent body, on physical rather than social elements of young male experience. It is important to note that this emphasis on the natural and a sense occurred at a time of enormous social and technological change and fears about the growing presence of a new youth class, increasingly resident at home and gaining money independently in new systems of labour and socialising on the street. The expansion of new technologies, such as the telegraph, made patterns of progression in the form of apprenticeship obsolete and created a massive demand for an unskilled and mobile labour force to service new technologies (1977:145). Roberts' memoir documents a similar pattern of youth employment in his hometown Salford of early opportunity and sudden redundancy:

one notorious sewing machining factory managed to turn out its wares with only four or five skilled adult workers to every hundred adolescents, all of whom were sacked by the time they reached twenty... [these jobs] led youth nowhere except to dismissal on reaching manhood. (1968:168).

So, this then – to conclude this section - was an example of capitalism *as usual*, a prefiguring from an insecure past of the precarious twenty-first century world of zero hours contracts, the world inhabited by Liam in Butler's work *Boy*.

The potential for this kind of historic analysis of adolescent identities was deepened by the experience of the 2011 riots and the 'othering' of the urban young that ensued and a contrast with the 1911 riots – which by co-incidence I was researching at the time.

In Daily Mail journalist Max Hastings, for example, wrote of the riots as 'caused by years of liberal dogma' and the rioters as 'essentially wild beasts.... bereft of the discipline that might make them employable, of the conscience that distinguishes them between right and wrong' (2011). Sociologist Steve Hirschler recorded how historian David Starkey described the riots as part of an invasive non-English culture –and made notorious and offensive comments on Question Time of the Whites becoming black.

Very similar patterns of rhetoric of the 'othering' and demonising of adolescent rioters can be found in reporting of the 1911 Schoolboy riots.

Where mainly young men and boys, inspired by industrial action which had closed Britain's ports, railways and industries, joined protests which spread across the country to many cities, including Liverpool and Glasgow. The abolition of homework and corporal punishment featured strongly in protest demands.

(These protests bear striking resemblances to the English Riots of 2011. Economic grievances were key factors of twenty-first century protest, e.g. anger at the rising of student loan fees in 2010 and abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). The 'wildfire' spreading of the riots to different geographical areas, a characteristic of both protests, also demonstrates co-relations in factors of urban deprivation and a widely-shared, national rather than purely local basis of discontent).

In response to the 1911 riots and disturbances in Liverpool, then Home Secretary, Winston Churchill sent in a complete brigade of Infantry and two regiments of cavalry to suppress them. In a report in *The Times* on August 8th, 1911, Churchill distinguished between leaders of unrest and 'hooligans' who 'of course join in wherever mischief is afoot. It is in their nature to do so, and every one knows it'.

Very similar in tone and rhetoric to David Cameron's call for 'all out war' on gangs (2011) that mirrored the response of the Home Secretary a century earlier.

Social histories of youth, in particular the work of historian Geoffrey Pearson, have functioned for me as primary sources in developing ideas of continuities in the representation and othering of adolescent identities. Pearson's influential study, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (1983) was prompted by the harsh tabloid responses to young people and the black community that followed the 1981 riots in British inner cities. He draws attention to ways in which ideas of youth delinquency have been constructed *historically* through the operation of modern mass media and the creation of social panic through manufactured 'crises'. Pearson identified recurring patterns in the

relationships between the media and ideas of youth delinquency, arguing that the panics which followed the 1981 riots and the characterisation of urban youth as 'alien' were 'convenient metaphor' that masked far more complex issues (p.230). In a reprise of his arguments after the riots in 2011, Pearson cites the problematic association of the adolescent with fears of the urban young working-class male in post-war Britain:

the whole face of society has changed in the last 20 years... unaccustomed riches... materialism without effort.. in his worst light the adolescent can take on an alarming aspect: he has learned no moral standards from his parents, is contemptuous of the law, easily bored... vulnerable to the influence of TV programmes of a deplorably low standard. (2013:45)

Through this example, written in 1961 in the *British Medical Association Journal*,¹ Pearson demonstrates the historic relationships between ideas of adolescence and perceptions of delinquency and moral decline. Awareness of these associations is necessary, he argues, to guard against 'historical amnesia and a deep cultural pessimism'

¹ *The British Medical Association Journal*, (1961: 5-6)

which may deter us 'in our attempts to fashion realistic responses to the current actualities and dilemmas' (2013:45).

Before applying this lens to two case studies of plays. I want to advance one further critical perspective, based on different readings of masculinity that develops argument for the historicisation of adolescent identities in performance studies.

Fintan Walsh's study *Male Trouble. Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis*

draws attention to historic and social conditions that have shaped masculinity and to ways in which masculinity is acquired *symbolically*.

Walsh's discussion acknowledges contemporary social aspects of crisis and precarity. He also draws attention to structural functions of crisis in the construction of male identities, arguing that 'certain types of crisis are 'also constitutive of subjectivity', citing Mangan's perspective that, 'masculine gender identity is never stable; its terms are continually being redefined and re-negotiated'² (p.9).

² Taken from an unpublished paper by Michael Mangan, 'Shakespeare's First Action Heroes: Critical Masculinities in Culture, both Popular and Unpopular', quoted in Beynon, J. (2002) *Masculinities and Culture*, (p.90).

Historians John Roper and Michael Tosh offer a further insight in relation to 'how cultural representations become part of subjective identity' (1991:15), which supports a view of adolescent male 'crisis' as a process where dominant ideas of gender and other power relations are either accepted or challenged:

One of the most precarious moments in the reproduction of masculinity is the transfer of power to the succeeding generation, whether it be within the family from father to son, via apprenticeship in the case of skilled workers, or by 'palace revolutions' in business. The key question is whether the 'sons' take on the older generation's gender identity without question, or whether they mount a challenge, and if so how. (p.17)

These readings indicate ways in which the representation of adolescent 'crisis' can be understood as a structural aspect of performance in the *cultural* reproduction of masculine identities – that adolescence in performance is the site of a complex renegotiation of masculine identity and transmission of values between generations. In my case studies, what I wish to explore further is the representation of adolescence as a site where the representation of the adolescent is a

convenient metaphor that masks underlying intergenerational social divisions perpetuated in late capitalist societies.

- a site where *the failure* in capitalist societies to create viable paths of social and symbolic progression for progression for young men to adult 'status' is explored.

THE HOOLIGAN – GILBERT

There are a number of Edwardian plays particularly around the time of 1911 which begin to explore adolescence in relation to the idea of intergenerational crisis, the inability of a fast-changing society to pass on its values within an instable system.

I'm going to discuss W.S. Gilbert's play, *The Hooligan* (1912) is significant a drama of the period which argued for a more humane response to the urban working-class young. It also demonstrated innovation, both as the first realist treatment of working-class youth to be performed in a music hall venue and in its formal invention in representing the language of the working-classes.

The play, written as a thirty minute 'character sketch' is a study of Solly, a young condemned murderer waiting for execution, having killed his girlfriend in a crime of passion. Solly, 'a hooligan under sentence of death', is represented as unfit, a product of familial and generational failure and less emphatically, of a societal failure for his condition. He is described by warders as soft-spined and 'like a wet hammock' (1912:94). Solly describes himself as 'feeble-minded; this play *à thèse*, the question Gilbert asks the audience is whether Solly should be judged on the same basis as – significantly, thinking about labour - someone who has been taught a trade. Solly is incapable of independent action, even the news that his death sentence is to be reprieved prompts him, somewhat improbably and melodramatically, to have a heart attack and die.

Gilbert's use of colloquial language does mark a significant watershed in the use of new kinds of speech to define working-class identities. It also demonstrates implicitly conservative assumptions about an ineradicable link between character and environment. From a cultural materialist perspective, the play was progressive in its cultural form but it also perpetuated Victorian hierarchies of infantilising the young.

Raymond Williams argues that early forms of representing the demotic have been praised for their 'apparent exclusion of self-conscious authorial commentary', but they actually marked a process whereby observation, or commentary has been completed within narrative; it has become a 'whole way of seeing at a "sociological" distance' (p.119). This perspectives show how attempts at realism in this period, such as Gilbert's treatment of Solly, simultaneously reveal social distance and separation between the writer and the subject. While Gilbert's representation of the working-class young male was vigorous in its arguments for a reconsideration of the application of criminal justice, it also reflected the legacies of Victorian Romantic conceptualisations of the child and its nemesis of juvenile corruption.

There are many plays I could discuss here from 1911 which explore intergenerational crisis and adolescence within middle class settings

... but I don't want you all heading for the bar just yet... so I'll leave those for another day....

This case study is significant within a critical genealogy as it can be read in relation to identifying continuous ideas in the representation of adolescent identity – of historic dispossession from a pre-industrial ideal, the othering of urban youth, of normative associations of the urban young with crime, of the young as convenient metaphor of a social failure to create paths of social and symbolic progression within systems of capitalised labour. It also raises questions which still have merit today as to the authoring of the young and politics of representation, the relationship of the audience to these representations of the urban poor and the depth of analysis which informs it.

In my final case study I want to develop an emerging theory, that a historicisation of adolescent identities may be gaining ground within theatre representation. This idea is speculative to a degree but it is one I am curious about and wish to develop in framing my recent analysis of plays of the 2000s. I question whether a desire to ‘dissect the socio-political’ in more depth may now be more actively explored by writers. Might it mirror perhaps, the historicisation of gay identities in the work of Gay Sweatshop in the 1980s which articulated a

manifesto for a new consciousness of gay identity and rights through plays such as *As Time Goes By* which explored gay lives in different centuries or *Mr. X* whose starting point was the representation of adolescent sexuality and freedom?

The basis for this emerging theory is located in an interpretation of Black British Theatre which addresses the 'othering' of Black urban youth but also discusses *the necessity* for black youth to consider historic forces that shape identities and challenge dangerous stereotyping. Given the historic 'othering' of the urban adolescent as 'foreign', a non-British alien, I think these arguments have wider application for discussing urban youth identities in general.

Goddard describes how plays about crime and violence have become 'the dominant theatrical stories of black British experience in the new millennium' (2013:333). She argues that these plays are at risk of ghettoising black experience and of 'perpetuating stereotypes about violent black masculinity for the delectation of predominately white, middle-class, audiences within their original mainstream theatre contexts'.

More specifically, she argues that contemporary urban-themed play-writing needs to address the *historic* forces that have shaped youth identities. Goddard discusses, for example, the educational material that accompanied Kwame Kwei-Armah's Royal National Theatre production of *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003) to illustrate the absence of historic perspectives within current practice. The play's core subject is an intergenerational struggle between father and son in urban Hackney that makes explicit links to histories of slavery. However, the education pack produced to accompany the play focuses on technical approaches to theatre and the play structure with a nod to father and son relationships. This example demonstrates the limitations of models of contemporary practice that fail to acknowledge how history shapes social identities. It also indicates the potential for historic interpretations to enrich educational material and other forms of engagement that theatre may offer the young.

ADEBAYO

These possibilities are explored in the work of Mojisola Adebayo's work *Desert Boy* which utilises the rich, imaginative possibilities of theatre to juxtapose, interweave and contrast different historic experiences of adolescence and identify connections between contemporary dystopia and the historic conditions that have shaped them.

The play's epic structure and wide narrative scope looked beyond urban dystopia to a historical view of Black British youth that connects the contemporary both to histories of slavery and possibilities for a future. Set on Deptford Beach, the audience first encounters Soldier Boy severely wounded and possibly bleeding to death from a knife attack. The figure of Desert Man emerges from the sand to take the knife from the wound and to make Soldier Boy 'confess' what has brought him to the place. Temporal and spatial fixities are suspended as Soldier Boy gets up and the beach becomes a transitional aesthetic space, positioned between the past and future. Within the 'confession' that follows, Desert Man leads as an oracle, guide, mentor through scenes where the causes of Soldier Boy's family crisis are relived and re-examined. We learn he has rowed with his mother on his sixteenth birthday and that he was born on the day in 1993

when black teenager Stephen Lawrence was killed. These scenes are juxtaposed with scenes from Desert Man's history in Mali, the land of his ancestors, and generate a continuing dialectic within the drama where the audience is positioned as co-constructors seeking to create connections between the present and the past. Within this investigation, Desert Boy's history of slavery, displacement and the collapse of the familial order of his tribe, the Dogon, are compared with Soldier Boy's own childhood where he is abandoned by his father and raised by his mother, an alcoholic who works as a prostitute to survive. These scenes offer in performance a critical genealogy of social history that seeks to explain the present and the forces that shape the symbolic and social progression of the young male to adulthood.

As Lynette Goddard identifies in her introduction to Adebayo's first volume of plays:

unlike the conventional social realism of many of the other black plays dealing with these urban concerns, *Desert Boy* foregrounds an African diasporic storytelling style, incorporating an a capella chorus, music, movement, and the

transformation of objects into different uses. (2011:15):

Soldier Boy begins a critical questioning of the forces that shape both contemporary and past black male attitudes to society and parenting. As part of this process he questions governing ideas and rejects, for example, the rhetoric of the need for 'role models' in a plea for more authentic relationships and the restoration of the loss of his father.

When Soldier Boy learns that Desert Man is his ancestor, he rejects Desert Man's abandoning of his family but this is the beginning of a final process of critical reflection, of an acceptance of the legacies of slavery and its disruptions to family structures which leads to new understandings of social and family responsibility. Soldier Boy's final realisation that his wound was caused by self-harm marks the culmination of a process of increased self-knowledge, a rejection of ideas of fixed identity for an assumption of agency, a more nuanced and personal acceptance of a struggle for truth.

Adebayo's dramaturgical structures illustrate how radical approaches to contemporary identities and interrogation of the past

create new readings and understandings of the present. Adebayo's play combines a realist approach to twenty-first century society with non-realist approaches which offer other possibilities of interpretation. Her interrogation of the past also involves a re-imagination of transitional spaces of work and education leading to a future.

Creativity, art and stable employment are part of the plays final vision of social and symbolic progression to 'Build something, like Stephen would have done, a bridge maybe.'

So to bring some ideas to a conclusion here..

CONCLUSION

What I have sought to illustrate is the relevance of historicising adolescent identities to understand the social and political dilemmas faced by the young in conditions of 21st century precarity.

Comparative analysis of social histories of both Edwardian and early twenty-first societies indicates how both can be characterised as periods of Heraclitean social and technological change where processes of

transfer of values and social identities between generations are challenged

- and where, as in the intervening years, ideas of masculinity were less dominated by the cultural imaginary of militarised society

Charting continuities in ways adolescents were othered as a disruptive social group can draw attention to the capital and labour relations that created new spatial separations between old and young and conditions which promoted intergenerational crisis.

Discussing plays as social records, contextualising them within social histories and charting the emergence of representation of adolescence within a cultural materialist perspective can also illuminate ways in which social anxieties, the adult ideation of fear, co-alesce around the idea of intergenerational exchange and the ability of society to nurture and sustain its young. New work that historicises adolescent identities can challenge the previous insularity from the past of early 21st century writers.... interrupt normative association of the adolescent with contemporary social dysfunction in particular. A vision, perhaps, of a new theatre expressed by Finn Kennedy of:

Theatres with libraries brimming with history books and cultural critiques, theatres with meaningful links to local community groups and access to the thinkers and theorists of our time. (2004)

A tentative re-definition, a provisional critical framework to facilitate future interpretations of male 'adolescences' in performance and theatre practice.

A historical turn? Speculate about this...

Or a more reflexive approach among theatre practitioners to theatre histories that uncover a genealogy of practice... continuities between say the the work of Noel Greig and ways in which we educate practitioners....

This latter interpretation and more recent studies of radicalisation in diasporic contexts will be examined to give urgency to a consideration of how boys and adolescents acquire symbolic and social adult male status.

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