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Diffraction the Backwash: On the after/life of Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and the "Savile Effect"

Helen Iball

[final draft 2020]

Speaking with ghosts is not to reconstruct some narrative of the way it was but to respond, to be responsible, to take responsibility for that which we inherit (from the past and the future). (Karen Barad)¹

1. Meeting itself coming back

Marking the twentieth anniversary of the play's premiere,² Sheffield Crucible Theatre's *Blasted* (UK, 2015)³ is an intriguing case study for Jonathan Miller's concept of afterlife. In *Subsequent Performances* (1986), Miller explains 'I find the phrase *afterlife* useful because it draws attention to the peculiar transformation undergone by works of art that outlive the time in which they were made'.⁴ This article explores the Sheffield production as a context of outliving in which *Blasted* met (a version of) itself coming back. Disrupting the linear forward trajectory implied by Miller, this complex fold has affinities with Karen Barad's quantum hauntology for which 'here and there and now and then are not separate coordinates, but entangled reconfigurings of spacetime mattering'.⁵ Understanding *Blasted*'s after/life as an inheritance 'from the past and future'⁶ generates responsibility to its ghosts. The mid to late 2010s were a particular calling to account of abuses that had been overlooked in previous decades, and indeed seemed to have been tolerated. The demand for retrospective accountability was characterised by the activism of #MeToo, and in the

¹ Karen Barad, 'Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings and Justice-to-Come', *Derrida Today*, 3.2 (2010), 240-68 (264).

² *Blasted* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs (London, UK) January 12, 1995 directed by James MacDonald.

³ *Blasted* directed by Richard Wilson, February 4-21, 2015. Staged as part of the Sarah Kane season at Sheffield Theatres (February 5-21, 2015), which also featured full productions of *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* directed by Charlotte Gwinner, and semi-staged readings of *Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed* directed by Daniel Evans, plus a screening of *Skin*.

⁴ Jonathan Miller, *Subsequent Performances* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988 [1986]), 23. Italics in original.

⁵ Karen Barad, in Malou Juelskjaer and Nete Schwennesen, 'Intra-active Entanglements – an interview with Karen Barad', *Kvinder, Køn and Forskning NR*, 1-2 (2012), 10-23 (19).

⁶ Barad, 'Quantum Entanglements', 264.

criminal trial and conviction of high-profile serial abusers including Jeffrey Epstein and Harvey Weinstein. As discussed below, such a climate of reckoning coupled with an unsettling topicality and locality impacted on *Blasted* in Sheffield. A resonant metaphor for this scenario is the North American colloquialism “backwash” which describes ‘the liquid that flows back into a bottle, glass, etc after someone has taken a drink’ and is ‘assumed to contain that person’s saliva’.⁷ The ways in which sediment from this backwash met (and perhaps contaminated) Kane’s script is complicated further by the dramatic structure of *Blasted*, which could also be said to meet itself coming back.

In an article published in 2012, lawyer and academic Honni van Rijswijk considered *Blasted* as a cultural ‘theorisation of the representation of sexual violence in international law’.⁸ Her discussions of *Blasted* ‘animate questions concerning the relationship between feminism and representation’ - particularly feminist theories of harm - in terms of ‘the law’s relationship to wider cultural assumptions and narratives’.⁹ Rijswijk notes that distinctions between the everyday and the event are prevalent in legal representation on harm and trauma, and she reads *Blasted* as an aesthetic problematisation of these distinctions. It is a play that makes us ‘aware, painfully, of the cost of the law’s stories, and the effects of its logics’.¹⁰ Rijswijk states that the second part *Blasted* makes its audiences look back on the opening scenes to recognise not only ‘the extent of Cate’s harms, but also the injustice of their usual invisibility’.¹¹ However, and as the next section considers, this habituated invisibility was under legislative, media, and public scrutiny by 2015 - and some of the effects may be traced through reviews of the Sheffield production.

As ‘a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance’,¹² diffraction is a vital apparatus for studying *Blasted* as a diffractive play, and to investigate its after/life. Diffraction ‘as metaphor and methodology’ requires an ‘onto-epistemological and

⁷ ‘Oxford Dictionary of English’, *Dictionary*, Apple Inc. version 2.3.0 (239.5), 2005-2019.

⁸ Honni van Rijswijk, ‘Towards a Feminist Aesthetic of Justice: Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* as Theorisation of the Representation of Sexual Violence in International Law’, *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 36:1 (2012), 107-124.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹² Trinh Minh-Ha, from ‘Not You/Like You: Post- Colonial Women and the Interlocking Question of Identity and Difference’, *Inscriptions*, special issues ‘Feminism and the Critique of Colonial Discourse’ 3 – 4 (1988), quoted in Karen Barad, ‘Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart’, *Parallax* 20:3 (2014), 168-187 (169).

ethical shift in our thinking so that we begin to take notice of the differences and transformations that emerge in specific events'.¹³ The diffractive methods in this article recognise a contextual and ethical imperative to bring two strands of Kane scholarship - feminist and posthuman - into dialogue. In this activity 're-turning' is a mode of 'diffracting diffraction', undertaken 'not by returning as in reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again'.¹⁴ In later sections of this article, discussing Louise LePage's articles on *Blasted*¹⁵ activates a 'turning over and over again'¹⁶ of details from my earlier writing about the play,¹⁷ which (in turn) re-reflects memories from its production history. Diffractive methods are a means to scrutinise (and the reason for troubling) the Sheffield production, as part of an accumulating history in which the play has been harnessed (or hijacked) to represent a particular crime or war zone. Sheffield joins other productions in which *Blasted* has been directed to represent specific cases of abduction and abuse.¹⁸ It is a context in which *Blasted's* after/life became sedimented with the shame – and perhaps morbid curiosity – of a nation manipulated and exploited by one of its own "celebrities".

2. Jimmy Savile

When theatre critic Matt Trueman claims the Sheffield production of *Blasted* 'remakes this play for 2015' he does so in a review dominated by Ian's (Martin Marquez) behaviour towards Cate (Jessica Barden). Trueman says that these interactions made it 'impossible not to think of Jimmy Savile [*sic.*]'.¹⁹ Savile (1926-2011), a well-known UK disc jockey, television presenter, and charity fundraiser, was investigated posthumously for 'prolific and

¹³ Vivienne Bozalek and Michalinos Zembylas, 'Practicing Reflection or Diffraction? Implications for Research Methodologies in Education', in *Socially Just Pedagogies: Posthuman, Feminist and Materialist Perspectives in Higher Education*, eds. Rosi Braidotti, Vivienne Bozalek, Tamara Shefer, Michalinos Zembylas (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 47-62 (56).

¹⁴ Barad, 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart', *Parallax* 20:3 (2014), 168-187 (168).

¹⁵ Louise LePage, 'Rethinking Sarah Kane's Characters: A Human(ist) Form and Politics', *Modern Drama* 57.2 (2014), 252-72; Louise LePage, 'Posthuman Sarah Kane', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 18.3 (2008), 401-3.

¹⁶ Barad, 'Diffracting Diffraction', 168.

¹⁷ Helen Iball, 'Room Service: en suite on the *Blasted* frontline', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 15.3 (2005), 320-29; Helen Iball, *Sarah Kane's Blasted* (London: Continuum, 2008).

¹⁸ For examples see: Iball, *Sarah Kane's Blasted*, 69.

¹⁹ Matt Trueman, 'Blasted (Sheffield Crucible) – anniversary revival does Sarah Kane's play full justice', *WhatsOnStage*, February 11, 2015, https://www.whatsonstage.com/sheffield-theatre/reviews/blasted-sheffield-crucible-sarah-kane_37128.html (accessed July 14, 2020).

predatory'²⁰ sexual offences spanning six decades from 1955 to 2009.²¹ Throughout this time, Savile had been 'hiding in plain sight'.²² Using documentary sources, the story of a woman fighting to be believed about her abuse by Savile was told in Jonathan Maitland's play *An Audience with Jimmy Savile* (Park Theatre, London, June 2015).²³ Produced in the same year as Maitland's play, the Sheffield production of *Blasted* coincided loosely with multiple safeguarding reports from investigations conducted into organisations including NHS (National Health Service) Trusts and the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation).²⁴ Barrister Kate Lampard's report on abuse at forty NHS hospitals warned that 'elements of the Savile story could happen again' and recommended 'the need for us to examine safeguarding arrangements in NHS hospitals' and 'how managers and staff respond to complaints'.²⁵ There had been a decision not to prosecute Savile in 2009, which Alison Levitt QC deduced was a result of allegations not being taken seriously.²⁶

The term "Savile Effect" was coined to denote that, whilst cases 'against Savile were never made in a court of law', they impacted upon 'legislation and policy and public opinion' in

²⁰ From a statement by the Scotland Yard team investigating Jimmy Savile in Operation Yewtree, a joint inquiry launched 2012 with NSPCC (National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children). For the report in full, see, <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/yewtree-report-giving-victims-voice-jimmy-savile.pdf> (accessed July 14, 2020).

²¹ See, 'Jimmy Savile: timeline of his sexual abuse and its uncovering', *Guardian*, June 26, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jun/26/jimmy-savile-sexual-abuse-timeline> (accessed July 14, 2020).

²² Commander Peter Spindler, Head of the Operation Yewtree Investigation. For the full report, see <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/yewtree-report-giving-victims-voice-jimmy-savile.pdf> (accessed July 14, 2020).

²³ Alistair McGowan played Jimmy Savile. For an account of complaints and praise for the play see, <https://www.boltburdonkemp.co.uk/news-blogs/child-abuse-blog/an-audience-with-jimmy-savile/> (accessed September 27, 2020).

²⁴ Results of investigations by the Department of Health were published in June 2014, the same month that the NSPCC confirms at least 500 reports of abuse. Stoke Mandeville Hospital's report published in February 2015 stated Savile's reputation as 'a sex pest' was an 'open secret' amongst staff. In 2016, Dame Janet Smith's review (launched in 2012) stated that the BBC missed opportunities to stop Savile due to 'deeply deferential' attitudes and a 'culture of fear'.

²⁵ For Lampard's full report, see https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/407209/KL_lessons_learned_report_FINAL.pdf (accessed November 28, 2020). See also: Nick Trigg, 'Savile: Why the risks are real in today's NHS', *BBC News*, February 26, 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-31622591> (accessed November 28, 2020).

²⁶ Alison Levitt QC, 'In the Matter of the Late Jimmy Savile' Report to the Director of Public Prosecutions, January 11, 2013.

‘ways that fundamentally affect due process when others are accused of historical abuse’.²⁷ The “Savile Effect” acknowledges ‘the considerable increase in disclosures of abuse made since the UK media first reported in October 2012 on Operation Yewtree’s investigation into the sexual assaults inflicted by Jimmy Savile and by other media personalities’.²⁸ A law firm working in this field describes how the ‘reports of Operation Yewtree gave abuse survivors a voice’. It helped the survivors ‘feel that they would be believed and supported – when for years, their abusers had told many of them that they would be considered liars’ or that ‘the victims themselves were the ones to blame for the abuse’.²⁹ The risk of over-compensating was demonstrated by the handling of Operation Midland (2014-16). In this case, false allegations of child sexual abuse were made against political and military figures. Subsequent inquiries found the police had been too willing to take Carl Beech’s statements seriously, a response attributed to corrective efforts following the mishandling of allegations about Savile.³⁰

For the Sheffield production, sediment from the Savile case and its wider impacts may have compromised *Blasted*’s critical interventions. The next section investigates how this sediment redistributed emphasis. It appears to have intensified (but also narrowed) focus on the first part of the play, and increased the temptation to identify the opening scenes as social realism.³¹ This, in turn, risks consolidating Ian and diminishing Cate, perhaps through (patriarchal) efforts to ensure blamelessness for the victim. Rijswijk notes that ‘*Blasted* reminds us that gender is at the centre of dominant cultural and legal narratives of sexual violence’ and that these representations are ‘extremely powerful in determining the ways in

²⁷ Mark Smith, ‘Researching celebrity historic sexual abuse allegations’, *The Justice Gap*, August 28, 2014, <https://www.thejusticegap.com/researching-celebrity-historic-sexual-abuse-allegations/> (accessed July 17, 2020).

²⁸ Tom West, who includes the following data: ‘By December 2012, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre was reporting a 30 per cent rise in reports of abuse, while calls to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children had increased by 200 per cent’. See: West, ‘An Audience with Jimmy Savile’, Bolt Burdon Kemp, <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=c4290668-fb22-4c67-819d-afcc8bf5a4bc> (accessed September 27, 2020).

²⁹ Sam Benton, ‘A “Savile Effect” spotlight on Hollywood? Considering “An Open Secret”’, Bolt Burdon Kemp, <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=c4290668-fb22-4c67-819d-afcc8bf5a4bc> (accessed September 27, 2020).

³⁰ The connection to the Savile inquiries was made by Sir Richard Henriques, former Justice of the High Court of England and Wales, and author of a report on the Carl Beech case. Henriques is interviewed by Vanessa Engle for her television documentary *The Unbelievable Story of Carl Beech*, BBC2, August 24, 2020.

³¹ Rijswijk, 108 and 118-19.

which adjudication proceeds and are also very difficult to shift'.³² Imagine overlapping ripples from two pebbles dropped into a pool: one pebble is the play and the other pebble the Savile inquiries. In his review of *Blasted*, Trueman's response echoes news soundbites. Voices apparently speaking for the play (i.e. Trueman as reviewer and the characterisations his writing describes) are ventriloquising Press reports and "public opinion" to speak over the play. This discourse appears to have integrity, because it claims to be reflecting a reality with which the play corresponds:

Jessica Barden's Cate looks adolescent, well short of 21 as specified in the script [...] Ian is patient and tender, caring even. He buys her breakfast, offers her drink and tells her he loves her - and he's all the more horrifying for that. This is how power works: it doesn't take or impose, it asks and expects to get. It's pernicious: reliant on an inability to say no - and that's how Wilson remakes this play for 2015. He shows us the play's hierarchy.³³

The review uses the production to reflect back pre-determined views. *Blasted's* 'hierarchy' which Trueman claims that Wilson 'shows us' is manipulated in order to impose a binarized narrative of power, inflected by Savile.³⁴ Reading Trueman's review through journalism on the Savile reports, whilst simultaneously attentive to details in the playscript, uncovers a remaking 'of this play for 2015'³⁵ which presents Ian and Cate in binary terms. This is a significant departure from recognising *Blasted* as a play in which the boundary 'between male perpetrators of violence and female victims is blurred',³⁶ and where (to invoke Barad's borrowing from Trinh Minh-ha via Donna Haraway)³⁷ there are 'differences as well as similarities *within* the concept of difference'.³⁸ Kim Solga contends that it is not the violence of *Blasted* but rather its 'unpredictability' which is its most troubling quality,³⁹ whilst

³² Rijswijk, 123.

³³ Trueman, 'Blasted anniversary revival', np.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Graham Saunders, 'Sarah Kane: Cool Britannia's Reluctant Feminist', in *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*, eds. Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 199-220 (217).

³⁷ Barad explains that Donna Haraway read Minh-ha's 'account of difference through the figure of diffraction', and that her own theory of quantum diffraction 'owes as much to a thick legacy of feminist theorizing about difference as it does to physics', in 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart', *Parallax* 20:3 (2014), 168-187 (172 & 168).

³⁸ Minh-ha, 'Not You/Like You' (1988) quoted in Barad, 'Diffracting Diffraction', 169.

³⁹ Kim Solga, 'Blasted's Hysteria: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible', *Modern Drama* 50:3 (2007), 346-374 (352).

Trueman acknowledges its ‘stomach-churning complexity that befits the times we live in’.⁴⁰ In the Introduction to *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, playwright David Greig observes that ‘nothing in the writing is condemning’ Ian, and so ‘no authorial voice is leading us to safety’.⁴¹

In 2012, just eleven months after crowds had gathered to pay tribute at his funeral procession in Leeds,⁴² Savile’s gravestone in Scarborough (North Yorkshire) was dismantled to maintain ‘the dignity and sanctity of the cemetery’.⁴³ Before the funeral, Savile’s coffin had been “laid in state” at the Queen’s Hotel, with an estimated five thousand people filing past to pay their respects.⁴⁴ That same hotel is believed to be the referent⁴⁵ for *Blasted*’s opening stage direction ‘a very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world’.⁴⁶ Reading these iterations through each other, the hotel becomes a curious portal for Ian/Savile superposition. In Barad’s terms, superposition is ‘not a simple overlaying or a mere contradiction’ but the material enactment of ‘differentiating/entangling’.⁴⁷ With the tag ‘in Leeds too...’ Trueman invokes the coincidence of Savile’s home city with the play’s setting, to reinforce connections between the script and this high-profile case of prolific sexual abuse. Whilst Trueman’s review stops short of naming the Queen’s Hotel, a similar connection emerges through his discussion of scenography. By means of an unsettling personification, Trueman renders the event a manifestation of (Savile’s) practised moves. He writes that the production ‘doesn’t jump us or assault us, ramming those escalating horrors down our throats. It’s cleverer than that; far subtler and insidious. This is a *Blasted* that holds out a hand, smiles, and walks us off into the darkness’.⁴⁸ These lines recall the statement from an official report, and picked up by

⁴⁰ Trueman, ‘*Blasted* anniversary revival’, np.

⁴¹ David Greig, ‘Introduction’ in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), ix-xviii (ix).

⁴² See, ‘Sir Jimmy Savile’s funeral takes place at Leeds Cathedral’, *BBC News*, November 9, 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-15647363> (accessed July 14, 2020).

⁴³ See, ‘Jimmy Savile’s grave to be dismantled in Scarborough’, *BBC News*, October 9, 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-19889974> (accessed July 14, 2020).

⁴⁴ See, ‘Jimmy Savile “lies in state” as 5,000 file past his coffin to pay their last respects’, *Guardian*, November 8, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2011/nov/08/jimmy-savile-coffin-public-display> (accessed July 21, 2020).

⁴⁵ For example, see: James Hudson, ‘*Blasted* at the Queen’s Hotel: Coincidence of sign and site’, *Performance Research* 18:3, 32-37.

⁴⁶ Kane, ‘*Blasted*’ in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), 2-61 (3).

⁴⁷ Barad, ‘Diffracting Diffraction’, 176.

⁴⁸ Trueman, ‘*Blasted* anniversary revival’, np.

journalists, that Savile ‘groomed the nation’.⁴⁹ Complicating this dynamic, the review describes James Cotterill’s set design in a manner that emphasises exposure and a concomitant sense of complicity (the recognition of which, conversely, might seem to excuse or exonerate us): ‘the windows that look out onto Leeds suggest a glass box’, ‘we know what’s coming and we’ve signed up’, ‘we want to be appalled’.⁵⁰

3. Cuts and cross-cuts

[W]hat needs rethinking is the presumed alignment of subjectivity and agency, and the notion that agency is something someone has. So agency is for me not a matter of something somebody has but it’s a doing, it’s the very possibilities for reworking and opening up new possibilities. (Barad)⁵¹

Discussing the 2015 Sheffield production, Nina Kane comments on the cutting of a line.⁵² This change is so small that it could pass unnoticed even for those familiar with the play, and yet, it is a significant edit with wider implications both for theatre practice and Kane scholarship. In Scene One, Ian says ‘When I’m with you I can’t think about anything else. You take me to another place’. The line that was cut is Cate’s response ‘it’s like that when I touch myself’.⁵³ Clearly, and as Nina Kane notes, the omission is problematic because it disappears female (auto)erotic pleasure. For the dialogue to make sense, it is likely that the production also removed subsequent lines. The small edit has further implications, because cutting Cate’s line also cuts Ian’s embarrassment:

Cate: It’s like that when I touch myself.

Ian *is embarrassed.*

Cate: Just before I’m wondering what it’ll be like, and just after I’m thinking about the next one, but just as it happens it’s lovely, I don’t think of nothing else.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Harry Hawkins quoting Commander Peter Spindler. See: Hawkins, ‘Predator Savile “groomed the nation”’, *Sun*, January 11, 2013, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/406879/predator-savile-groomed-the-nation/> (accessed July 14, 2020).

⁵⁰ Trueman, ‘*Blasted* anniversary revival’, np.

⁵¹ Barad, in Juelskjaer and Schwennesen, 17.

⁵² Nina Kane, ‘Breath and Light: *Blasted*, Sheffield Theatres and New Directions in the Staging of Sarah Kane’, *Litro* 4 (2015) <https://www.litro.co.uk/2015/04/breath-and-light-blasted-sheffield-theatres-and-new-directions-in-the-staging-of-sarah-kane/> (accessed July 24, 2020).

⁵³ Kane, ‘*Blasted*’, 22.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 22-3.

This depletes a dynamic that has constant shifts in tone and mood. In comparison with the playscript, Trueman's claim that the production 'shows us the play's hierarchy'⁵⁵ is reductive. Applying Barad's method of 're-turning as in turning it over and over again'⁵⁶ fuels a reading that emphasises *Blasted's* inherently diffractive strategies. Invoking my observation that, from its first scene onwards, the play shifts and refuses 'expectations of compartmentalisation',⁵⁷ Louise LePage seeks to 'extend and revise common assumptions about dramatic naturalism'.⁵⁸ She proposes that 'Kane's characters are naturalistic', but 'not in the sense assumed by Kane commentators who maintain that naturalistic characters 'are constructed upon Cartesian or liberal-humanist models of the self'.⁵⁹ Instead, LePage relates Kane's naturalism to 'the sort of "conglomerate" character August Strindberg describes in his preface to *Miss Julie* (1888)'.⁶⁰ In this mode 'familiar cultural identities, which are conventionally and predictably conflated with certain roles (i.e., naïve young Cate, a woman, is a rape victim), are quickly cast off to reveal far more complex conglomerates of character forms'.⁶¹

What LePage calls *Blasted's* 'constantly reshaping'⁶² power dynamic has a strong affinity with Barad's agential realist *intra*-actions. The notion of *intra*-action, in contrast to the usual "interaction" which presumes the prior existence of independent entities, represents a profound conceptual shift. 'It is through specific agential *intra*-actions that the boundaries and properties of the "components" of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful'.⁶³ In Barad's terms (e.g. dis/continuity) the slash indicates 'an active and reiterative (*intra*-active) rethinking of the binary'.⁶⁴ LePage's insistence that small differences matter;⁶⁵ a claim she exemplifies with Ian's acculturated gesture of placing the baby's body back in its makeshift grave, even after his desperate

⁵⁵ Trueman, '*Blasted* anniversary revival', np.

⁵⁶ Barad, 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart', *Parallax* 20:3 (2014), 168-187 (168).

⁵⁷ Iball, 'Room Service', 326. Quoted in LePage, 'Rethinking Sarah Kane's Characters', 261.

⁵⁸ LePage, 'Rethinking Sarah Kane's Characters', 252.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 252-3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁶² LePage, 'Posthuman Sarah Kane', 402.

⁶³ Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28:3 (2003), 801-31(815).

⁶⁴ Barad, in Juelskjaer and Schwennesen, 19.

⁶⁵ LePage, 'Rethinking Sarah Kane's Characters', 262.

hunger has led him to cannibalism; is consonant with Barad's assertion that 'it is important to try to do justice to a text' given that diffraction has 'an acute sensitivity to details'.⁶⁶ It is through 'specific agential *intra*-actions that a differential sense of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency', in which 'spontaneously responsive, moving, *embodied* living beings' are re-situated 'within a reality of continuously intermingling, flowing lines or strands of unfolding agential activity'.⁶⁷

As *Blasted* demonstrates repeatedly, it is through this flow that 'causal structures are stabilised and destabilised'.⁶⁸ At the end of scene one, Cate's line 'I don't love you' is followed by Ian, who '*turns away*' at her response and spots some flowers: 'these are for you'.⁶⁹ This inverts the order of the acculturated script (courtship), thus placing a stark emphasis on romantic "trappings" set in the single-minded pursuit of sex. In being sensitive to the details, and approaching them through agential realism, Kane's enduring question 'I mean what's she [Cate] doing in that hotel room with Ian?'⁷⁰ resonates differently and incessantly. In scene two, there is intense ambivalence when Cate '*picks up Ian's leather jacket and smells it. She rips the arms off at the seams*'.⁷¹ When Barad describes agential cuts as 'matters of cutting together-apart' it is with an immediate qualifier, bringing vital nuance:

The very notion of the cut is cross-cut. Quantum dis/continuity is an un/doing [...] Even its double naming "quantum" "discontinuity" – suggests the paradoxical notion of a rupture of the discontinuous, a disrupted disruption, a cut that is itself cross-cut [...] reiteratively reconfiguring thought/doing/matter/meaning without end.⁷²

Several times in the script, Ian's efforts to belittle Cate double-back on him. The example cited above (Cate: 'It's like that when I touch myself'. 'Ian *is embarrassed*') re-invokes earlier ones in which Cate over or under reacts in ways that, respectively, scare or expose Ian. The

⁶⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁷ John Shotter, 'Agential realism, social constructionism, and our living relations to our surroundings: Sensing similarities rather than seeing patterns', *Theory & Psychology* 24:3 (2014), 305-325, 306.

⁶⁸ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 140.

⁶⁹ Kane, 'Blasted', 24.

⁷⁰ Sarah Kane, interview by Aleks Sierz, February 4, 1998. For this quotation and interview context from Sierz, see: <https://www.sierz.co.uk/writings/sarah-kane-an-interview/> (accessed November 27, 2020).

⁷¹ Ibid., 25-6.

⁷² Barad, in Juelskjaer and Schwennesen, 19. See also: Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* Ch.7 for an in-depth discussion of agential separability.

distress he causes Cate by interrogative questioning brings on her seizures, which frighten Ian. He is caught off guard and very uncomfortable when his prejudiced (ableist, misogynist, homophobic, racist) taunts, reframed as genuine questions, are directed at him. In these instances, Ian becomes the (culturally-/self-inflicted) butt of his own insults and provocations. The first time this happens is when Ian says that he does not like Cate's clothes. When she counters that she does not like his clothes either, he strips them off – but Cate laughs, and so Ian fumbles with embarrassment trying to put the clothes back on.⁷³ Later in the scene, in response to his questioning about whether she 'ever had a fuck with a woman', Cate asks 'have you? With a man?'. In reply to his clichéd defensiveness, and risible rationale 'You've seen me. (*He vaguely indicates his groin.*) How can you think that?' she says simply 'I don't. I asked. You asked me'.⁷⁴ Even his attempt at shared experience is returned as a difference, when (in reply to Cate's 'it's like that when I touch myself') Ian makes a claim on similarity. He borrows Cate's opening gambit 'it's like that when I...' but the example he gives is the 'first cigarette of the day',⁷⁵ to which Cate retorts that smoking is bad for him. Such examples establish a strong sense of her resilience; Cate's habits and body-mind are better at sustaining her than Ian's alcohol and nicotine fuelled strategies for relief, which have done long-term (almost terminal) damage. She recognises that sexual pleasure is fleeting and, in-phase with Ian's constant cravings, says she is soon wondering about the next orgasm.⁷⁶ Ian's attitude to Cate 'Don't know nothing. That's why I love you'⁷⁷ is an inversion suspended in a colloquial expression - the double negative acknowledges (inadvertently) that she knows something.

The posthuman 'offers a spectrum through which we can capture the complexity of subject-formation' and 'as such it enables subtler and more complex analyses of powers and discourses' that can 'define our relational ethics and give us a political praxis' but 'it is up to

⁷³ Kane, 'Blasted', 7-8.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

“us” to make it possible, i.e. to actualize it’.⁷⁸ Graeae Theatre’s 2006-07 production (UK),⁷⁹ which I discussed in detail for the Continuum Modern Theatre Guide to *Sarah Kane’s Blasted* (2008), expressed the complex patterning and implication of the text by overlaying different elements of the *mise en scène*. This constant re-making of reality and re-distribution of power was the outstanding achievement of Graeae’s production, facilitated through their multi-channelled, widening-access aesthetic that used audio description, transcription (surtitles) and British Sign Language. The triumvirate victim-perpetrator-witness was complicated by large projection screens with giant sized actor-signers at different points, variously watching over, scrutinising, pre-empting, undermining, bolstering, or destabilising the onstage actor-characters. One of the most striking examples was the shifted power dynamic when the male signer was replaced by a female signer during scenes between Ian and Cate.⁸⁰ Graeae’s methods for generating interference patterns in the pre-blast scenes enabled a shift of scale and emphasis; the bombing was presented as a video of a glass ashtray, spinning from the force of the blast but still intact. The Graeae aesthetic created opportunities for staging spatiotemporal superposition, such as the entrance of the Soldier being presaged by the appearance of his actor-signer on the screen.⁸¹ The production manifested further layers, so that the audience was given opportunities to observe and hone understanding through insight into complex realities. There was material, intermedia evidence that *Blasted* recognises difference ‘as a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance’,⁸² and demonstrates that ‘agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfiguring of the world’.⁸³

4. *Blasted* after/life: Holding and re-turning

Sexual abuse and all that accompanies it – grooming, physical and emotional abuse – is about power, above all, and power survives and thrives on the disenfranchisement of others.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Rosi Braidotti, in *Socially Just Pedagogies: Posthuman, Feminist and Materialist Perspectives in Higher Education*, eds. Rosi Braidotti, Vivienne Bozalek, Tamara Shefer, Michalinos Zembylas (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), xix.

⁷⁹ Directed by Jenny Sealey and Alex Bulmer, Graeae’s *Blasted* toured the UK in spring 2006 and played London dates at the Soho Theatre in January 2007.

⁸⁰ See: Iball, *Sarah Kane’s Blasted*, 62.

⁸¹ For more details and further examples, see: Iball, *Sarah Kane’s Blasted*, 62.

⁸² Minh-ha quoted in Barad, ‘Diffracting Diffraction’, 169.

⁸³ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 141.

⁸⁴ West, ‘An Audience with Jimmy Savile’, np.

Blasted articulates complex relations of agency and subjugation. Through Barad's agential realism an understanding of what agency is, and who has agency, might be re-conceived. Rijswijk recognises that *Blasted* diagnoses 'problematic practices of representation' and provides an 'allegory of those entanglements and boundaries that have no straightforward resolution'. She observes that 'disturbing these boundaries in an authentic way would have profound results'.⁸⁵ The section above investigates how the play generates disturbances, and this article proposes that diffractive methods shift perspective and bring into doubt claims⁸⁶ that *Blasted* is 'mourning feminism' or that it is refusing to take 'a recognisable ideological or political position'.⁸⁷ Re-turning to LePage, and the introductory discussion of small details, diffraction might be a quiet noise (the constant ripples of *intra*-action) and perhaps, in the case of *Blasted's* after/life, one at risk of being drowned-out by early notoriety, generic claims for an *in-yer-face* theatre, and more recently by backwash from "Savile Effect"/s and #MeToo.

Blogging on Robert Holman's play *Making Noise Quietly* (1986) Dan Rebellato invokes Howard Barker, a playwright whose work inspired Kane, as it did many of our generation of UK theatre students. Rebellato recognises a key change in his perspective:

In his programme note to *The Bite of the Night* (1988), Howard Barker writes 'the play for an age of fracture is itself fractured and hard to hold, as a broken bottle is hard to hold'. Aged 20 I think I only saw the fracture: I missed that Barker presumes that we are trying to hold the bottle.⁸⁸

Agential realism, in the script and as an investigative apparatus, has an affinity with Sianne Ngai's 'aesthetic of the interesting' which 'begins as a feeling of not knowing exactly what we are feeling'.⁸⁹ Even now, re-reading the play is uncomfortable and unsettling. Kane 'never supplied an author's note to her plays [...] believing that if a play was any good it

⁸⁵ Rijswijk, 123.

⁸⁶ See, for example: 'Feeling the Loss of Feminism: Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and an Experiential Genealogy of Contemporary Women's Playwriting, *Theatre Journal* 62:4 (December 2010), 575-91.

⁸⁷ See: Graham Saunders, 'Sarah Kane: Cool Britannia's Reluctant Feminist', in *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*, eds. Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 199-220 (218 & 201).

⁸⁸ <http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/spilledink/2013/3/12/making-noise-quietly> (accessed September 27, 2020).

⁸⁹ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 135.

would speak for itself'.⁹⁰ Endeavouring to sustain spaces for the play to 'speak for itself', this article is also campaign for holding our nerve. As Ngai observes 'to performatively call something interesting (often with an implicit ellipsis, "interesting...") is to highlight and extend the period of ongoing conversation'.⁹¹ The detail and nuance of the source text presents an opportunity for dismantling assumptions about seemingly robust hierarchies on a micro (quantum diffractive) level. This requires being able to tolerate (and with Rebellato 'attempt to hold') ambivalence and unruly appetites, so as to turn the play 'over and over' (Barad) and 'keep going back for another look' (Ngai). This is a strategy for resisting retreat into the "safety" (and dangers) of reconstituted binaries, towards *Blasted* after/life without mitigation for the discomfiting prescience of Kane's playwriting.

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⁹⁰ Greig, 'Introduction', xviii.

⁹¹ Ngai, 234.