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## Staging Women in Prison: Clean Break Theatre Company's Dramaturgy of the Cage

### Introduction: Resisting tropes of the cage

Bad girls and chicks behind bars have made for compelling film and television material since *Caged Heat*, (1974) and the proliferation of so-called 'exploitation films' in which women's transgressions were the backdrop to their sexual availability. The popularity of Australia's *Prisoner Cell Block H* (1979 – 1986) and the UK series *Bad Girls* (1999 – 2006) have forged a taxonomy of women characters that range from gangs of psychopathic troublemakers to isolated vulnerable wenches. There is a steady proliferation of cultural products about crime, punishment and justice that means there is an existing set of tropes of prison spaces, cultures and characters (Carrabine, 2010; 2012; Jewkes, 2006; Wilson & O'Sullivan, 2004). This is extended in light of the popular US TV series *Orange is the New Black* (2013), which has increased visibility for the issues of women in prison through its accessible semi-comedic format and Australian TV drama *Wentworth Prison* (2013-present). However, as Caoimhe McAvinchey points out, canonical representations often affirm our cultural assumptions of a stable notion of the prison (2011: 37-8). This suggests that the labour of plays, television series and films about prison serves to support narratives of justice that are inevitably limited. Partly, this attitude stems from a public desire to imagine the procedures of justice at work. In this regard, forms of culture perpetuate this by framing prisoners as morally 'other' by reinforcing their 'bad' behaviour, drawing on weak, unconvincing narratives about criminal behaviour, and by contrast, depicting institutions and their agents as 'good'.

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Mediated images and stories about prison encountered by the public highlight (and perhaps exaggerate) the divide between acceptable and transgressive behaviours, relying on stereotypes that are inevitably inscribed by race, class and gender (Walsh, 2014, 51).

Cultural criminology shows that the public imagination is inevitably conservative when it comes to the ways in which criminal identities are performed. When it comes to engaging with the prevailing narratives of how criminal women might be transformed through incarceration, they are mostly expressed negatively (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995). However, as an alternative to the visually conservative images of prisoners and prison that proliferate in media (Brown, 2009; 2014; Carrabine, 2010; 2012; 2014), theatre is a mode of cultural production that has attempted to address the limitations of staging prisons. This article glosses the background to the established arts in prisons scene prior to providing a critical perspective on contemporary plays by women writers staged by Clean Break Theatre Company in the UK since 2009. The intention is to engage with how theatre can both replicate and revise dominant portrayals of crime and criminality, and thus, to point towards its value for cultural criminology. The use of a feminist performance analysis draws on the need for interdisciplinarity in cultural criminological research outlined by Rafter (2014).

As one of the leading organisations operating in the field of arts in criminal justice in the UK, Clean Break operates a critically acclaimed artistic programme as well as a community focused education programme from its North London base. Established in 1979 by two women in prison who subsequently made theatre and toured it to institutions after release, the company is particularly invested in changing the pathways of women deemed to be 'at risk' of offending (Hermann, 2008). The dominant model in prison theatre (Clark, 2004; Hughes, 1998) is one in which women in prison

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devise and perform their own productions, often autobiographical or testimonial.<sup>i</sup> This work is well documented (Balfour, 2004; Cheliotis, 2012a & 2012b; Merrill & Frigon, 2015; Thompson, 1998) though it merits further research in relation to its criminological value. The Clean Break education programme is discussed by Merrill & Frigon (2015) in relation to an imaginative criminology. Their conception of participatory theatre work is that 'criminalized women who practice theatre are contributing to a holistic and creative imaginative criminology. Roles and meanings are challenged for both the participants as characters in a performance piece, and for audience members who re-engage with a population who have been silenced' (2015: 309). Yet, drawing on the work of Stan Cohen, Cheliotis (2012a; 2012b) discusses the benevolent logic of participatory arts programmes that form part of prison education as a symbolic function of the arts in the criminal justice system. The arts often presume a benevolent gloss that is not critically interrogated. Cheliotis says:

The greatest irony of all is that [...] symbolic effects have grave material consequences for the supposed recipients of state and middle-class benevolence, insofar as they work to legitimate offenders' past and ongoing repression by way of penal institutionalisation (2012b: 34).

By contrast, Clean Break's professional playwright commissions attempt to explore women's experiences of crime and criminal justice, and are mostly developed following intensive residencies in prisons in which the playwright uses creative writing to stimulate debate, discussion and artistic materials from the prisoners. Clean Break's artistic work is seen (in terms of funding as well as intent) as distinct from the education programme since the company aims to develop a public platform for the issues highlighted by feminist criminologists (particularly relating to unjust and unnecessary recourse to incarceration for women). The resulting plays are often critically acclaimed for their

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engagement with the important issues that rarely get discussed outside policy circles (Gardner, 2010).<sup>ii</sup> What is important here is that the artist, rather than the prisoner/ participant is the author of the representation of the criminal justice system. It is for this reason that the plays merit critical attention, since the professional platform draws public attention to issues of criminological importance (not always unproblematically). There is a distinction to be made, however, between the social capital produced by the benevolent framing of participatory arts in prison practices critiqued by Cheliotis (2012a; 2012b) and the staging of women prison (McAvinchey, 2011). This distinction is largely due to aesthetic, fictional distance. Thus, instead of analysing efficacy or 'what works' (such as the reliance on reducing reoffending and external evaluations, or self-perception questionnaires), analysis of cultural products relies on considering the playwrights' aesthetic choices and their implications.

In this article, I propose that performance has a role to play in exposing and subverting the conservative trends that abound in cultural products about women in prison precisely because it moves beyond issues of 'representation' as outlined by Rafter (2014). Ferrell, Hayward and Young propose an understanding of cultural criminology that is predicated on this notion, stating that

Culture suggests a sort of shared public performance, a process of public negotiation – but that performance can be one of acquiescence or rebellion, that negotiation one of violent conflict or considered capitulation (2008: 4).

In light of this statement, for women in prison, performances of both docility and resistance demonstrate something about the cultural force of the institution as well as the social context. This is not, however, a 'problem' that remains at the level of women themselves, or the agents acting in their interests, but it extends to the potential for cultural products (including television, film, media

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and performance) to actively resist, engage critically with, and challenge the narratives about women, crime and justice. The article analyses several plays, querying the stability or fixity of female prisoners' subjectivities by unpacking the ways realism as a dramaturgical choice operates to uphold hegemonic positions that are in part spatially determined in carceral locations. It seeks to extend the established body of criminological literature that explores participatory practices (Balfour, 2004; Billone, 2009; Cheliotis, 2012a; 2012b; Clarke, 2004; Hughes, 1998; Merrill & Frigon, 2015; Thompson, 1998; Warner, 2001; 2004) to contribute to critical analysis of professional plays that stage women in prison.

### **Challenging genres, resisting the cage**

This article furthers the argument put forward elsewhere (Walsh, 2012; 2014), in which I suggest that it is possible, through examining everyday performances and the habitus of incarcerated populations, to witness the subjective agency of prisoners as manifesting prisons as sites of openness and possibility, and not merely as sites of containment. Some of this 'space-making' happens in transgressive or resistant acts such as 'dirty protests', hunger strikes, riots and rebellions, and sexual 'transgressions' of institutional norms.<sup>iii</sup> A recent promenade performance created by artist Mark Storor and produced by Artangel, *a tender subject* (2012) highlighted the disruption between prison's limitations and the possibilities for human connection. The performance engaged audiences as witnesses of moments of tenderness between men (officers and prisoners) in prison.<sup>iv</sup> This brief gloss of a contemporary performance demonstrates the potential of experimental forms to edge towards the politically urgent task of developing wider aesthetic and ethical responses to incarceration.

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The largely realist mode of plays about prison needs challenging in order to subvert the dynamics that define prisons as spaces of belonging or transgression, empathy or disgust. Recent performances from divergent approaches to contemporary theatre have explored the ways site and audience engagement serve to resonate more complex relationships between prison spaces, the phenomenology of 'the cage' and prisoners' journeys through prison spaces. These include Badac Theatre's *The Factory* Edinburgh Festival (2008); Clean Break's staging of Lucy Kirkwood's *it felt empty when the heart went at first but it's alright now*, Arcola Theatre, (2009); and Hydrocracker's staging of Harold Pinter's *The New World Order*, Brighton Festival, (2011). I propose that these alternative representations of prisons in performance challenge the hegemonic repetition of 'the cell', and that this could have a ricochet effect in the wider cultural sphere.<sup>v</sup>

The problem I identify here with realism is not that which is remarked upon by some cultural commentators (Clowers, 2001): that representations of women in prison (particularly in film) are 'unrealistic'. Rather it is about the potential for resistance that non-realistic cultural forms can take that is important. There are countless publications of autobiographical memoir that develop from the personal, cathartic unfolding of true events, seen in examples such as Pat Graney's *Keeping the Faith* project (Berson, 2008). While these forms have value in holding the narratives of pathways to crime within a wider context, there is a distinction between reporting the 'real' and cultural products that actively construct (and seek to transform) the relation between marginalisation, oppression, crime and hyper-incarceration. In other words, the argument against realistic portrayals of prison is precisely that they do not do enough cultural work to politicise their audiences, nor to re-frame the material conditions of women in prison.

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As the work of interdisciplinary scholars attests, the value of a performative analysis is in the ways in which:

[...] performance can also show up all the different ways in which 'small' spaces can have 'large' effects. For example, performance through doing has vocabularies of staging and layout, and knowledges of the way in which different stagings and layouts can call forth different dramatic effects, which are vital to our understanding of how bodies are sent about their daily business, positioned, and juxtapositioned in ways which think the world without drawing on cognition (Thrift, 2003: 2020).

Following Thrift's Foucauldian understanding of spaces as constituting a wider disciplinary function, prisons can be analysed as performative. Yet if we (as consumers of cultural products) view the operations of criminal justice as 'theatrical', then some of the political implications of incarcerated bodies are erased. Sophie Nield critiques the ways resistance or oppositions are called 'theatrical' since this serves to undermine their legitimacy or the claim to the 'real' (2006: 54). In other words, prison-as-performance presents a foreclosed morality that accepts the operations of power that incarcerates 'deviants'. This approach thus demands an exploration of the means by which these operations of power are understood through representation. By turning here to the representations of prison (and women in prison) in plays, and the promotion of specific theatrical tropes, we can better understand the ways dramaturgical structures maintain (or indeed, subvert) dominant views. In this light, I draw on Jill Dolan's work on lesbian positions in stage realism (1990). She explores the ways realism promotes 'readability' or legibility in the terms of the presumed patriarchal (heterosexual) audience (1990: 43– 45). For Dolan, 'lesbians disappear under the liberal humanist insistence that they are just like everyone else. Difference is effectively elided by readability' (1990: 44). In much the same way, the apparently humanist positioning of women in prison films, plays and



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some media as 'just like everyone else' erases the specificity of women's backstories. Similarly, by adhering to the constructions of female prisoners as holding binary positions of either 'monsters' or 'victims' of the system, plays can re-inscribe morally unitary approaches to women's deviance and resistance. Many plays about women in prison hold a claim for resisting stereotypes and in opposition to the injustice of criminal justice processes, and yet, in the realist mode, the monster/victim position seems to be an inescapable binary.<sup>vi</sup> Although not explicitly dealing with the many valuable studies about victimisation (Erez et al, 2009; Kara, 2009; Kennedy, 2005; McKinnon, 2009; Stern, 1989; Wilcox & D'Artrey, 2008), this binary is not intended to be the sole point of analysis here, but to serve as a means to explore how women in these specific playtexts are characterised. The particular relevance here is the need for research in feminist criminology to, as Heidensohn (2012: 131-132) points out, engage with gender, institutions, and develop studies that are intersectional. I will thus explore, through a close reading of several key play texts, the limitations of the dramaturgies of the cell.

Clean Break's artistic programme stages the potential for re-imagining the structures and practices of women's existence in prison. Attending to both personal and political structures in plays may remind audiences that there is a great deal of aesthetic and moral labour necessary in order to work towards a more radical, emancipatory platform for these concerns to be shared. This article furthers Mason's (2005) critique of the slippage between representation and the 'real' experience of prison in Wilson & O'Sullivan's (2004) book *Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television*. Since media and cultural products are inextricably bound up in the circulations of meaning around crime and justice, it is not difficult to understand that the existing tropes of prison and prisoners serve a wider disciplining function about transgression and social norms. Furthermore, it is not (always) the intention of artistic representations to mimic real life, and in the

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21<sup>st</sup> century, theatre genres offer alternative practices that may indeed move representations of women in prison beyond normative gender structures. Performance too relies on various norms and structures. Rebecca Prichard, a long-term affiliate playwright of Clean Break says

If you write really realistic stuff, that's purely realistic and you stick to traditional structures, you give an expectation or pattern that fulfills itself, as if you are saying everything is doomed... If you do pure social realism, it feels to me as if you are kind of saying this is the way it is and all we can do is despair (cited in Aston, 2010: 585).

Relating this to the prison aesthetic in theatre, I propose that what is needed is more resistance to the gritty, fearful sites of conflict that loom large in the prison imagination, mostly only ruptured by dream sequences. Instead, there is a greater need for dramaturgies that explore the fragility of mental health, thereby drawing on the possibility for absurd, or horrifying, or hallucinatory visions to be shared by the audience. In the latter half of the article, I deploy the theoretical and methodological concerns of a feminist structure of feeling in order to articulate more clearly how performances about prison necessarily operate within given structures, but also provides affective possibilities. Thus, the argument serves to provide a new point of analysis in cultural criminology from the perspective of performance studies, in addition to the more prevalent media analyses (Brown, 2009; Carrabine, 2010; Jewkes, 2007).

### **Towards feminist structure of feeling as methodology**

The article turns towards a well-worn analytic concept from literary studies – structure of feeling – in order to make an argument for a feminist re-appropriation in relation to women in prison and their representations in performance. Raymond Williams' formulation of the social and cultural

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contexts of analysis offers a framework for exploring how meanings and values are experienced – and in particular, how relations between experiences and formal/ systemic beliefs are variable. As a (contested) term, used in relation to performance analysis, it offers a means of engaging with ideological structures as well as the images, gestures and performances that emerge from these structures. For Williams,

certain experiences, meanings and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation (1977: 122).

Lisa Peschel constructs a compelling argument for reconsidering Raymond Williams' 'structures of feeling' as a methodological approach. She posits that by examining

the specific type of affect, the spatial and temporal nature of the structure it engenders, and the structure's relationship to power—and describing how they manifest themselves in the situations we are attempting to analyze, we may actually conform more closely, not to the letter of his definition, but to its spirit (2012: 171).

The value of structure of feeling is that it asks us to articulate the specificities of forms and conventions that present and represent different socialities. In its consideration of 'emergence', it is in confluence with cultural criminology's methodological approaches. Elaine Aston's formulation of a feminist structure of feeling (2003) is particularly useful in this study, since the feminist perspective necessarily engages with the ways entrenched patriarchal views become structured as

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normative; and that concomitant artistic choices in aesthetic representations of women are inflected with these underlying structures. Aston characterises a shift in contemporary performance of the 1990s that ultimately presented women as not merely victims of violence, but also as perpetrators (2003: 10). She draws attention to the social inequalities and injustices presented in plays; and then defines the 'rupture' or discontinuity of redefining 'agential' women as not merely passive recipients of violence, nor as aping the violence of others, but as agents reacting to structural legacies. This is in confluence with Roces' (2009) feminist scholarship on sex trafficking in which, for example the victim-survivor dyad is called a 'double narrative'.<sup>vii</sup>

This needs further unpacking in relation to women perpetrators of violent crime (see for example Hart, 1994), but in this argument, the notion of resistance is related to the interrelationship between the individual, affect and the extant power structures of the institution. These reactions may be productive or destructive, and as such, transgressive resistances present an understanding of the multiple ways affect complicates neat narratives. While realism proposes unity of meaning, other dramaturgical strategies can be valuable for the possibility of multiple, contradictory, and messy affect they promote. The female protagonists are rendered complex, rather than simplified, by these playwrights. Rather than being cast in one of the three categories 'victim', 'survivor', or 'hero', they shift, mercurially, between them. The following section engages with these shifts by exploring examples of plays by playwrights commissioned by Clean Break. The first short play by Chloë Moss functions to illuminate a dramaturgical point, and is not analysed in as much detail as the second.

In *Fatal Light*, which is a one-act play from the *Charged* programme at Soho Theatre in 2010 and 2011, Moss (2011) uses very short scenes structured in a reverse time sequence to indicate the consequences of imprisonment. The first scene concerns Maggie, who is a mother being informed

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by a police officer that her daughter has killed herself in custody. The narrative shifts from the ways in which the daughter, Jay, is trying to cope with being in prison (scared and lonely on her first night with an unsympathetic pad-mate and no one to talk to) to how Jay had been threatened with losing her daughter, Aine, tracing back family divisions to before Jay's birth. The reversed structure gives the audience a sense of the fragility of space and time inside, particularly highlighting the difficulty of the routine separation of mothers from their children. The play constructs a delicate structure of maternal feeling that is examined as a kind of reversed legacy: loss that is repeated through imprisonment and suicide, and emotional despair that seems like a bloodline.

The third short scene in the play introduces the young girl Aine into the prison cell, as Jay tries to comfort her, warm up her cold feet and warn her about being a good girl for her grandmother, who has ended up looking after her. In this scene, the presence of theatre allows for the transformation of the prison cell as bounded, singular and impenetrable into a space in which the little girl can join her mother for a cuddle. This formulation of the space creates the prison cell not merely a site of memories or fantasy (as in dream sequences, which in film are often marked out by different lighting, colour palettes and eras). Rather, the cell is permeable to desires – at least for a short while – until Jay's hold on her daughter is lost, and she begins screaming and battering the cell door.

This one act play is positioned here in order to demonstrate the potential of innovation in staging – in which the cell does not get represented as the 'answer' to an unruly woman, but the 'question' as to how Jay, a vulnerable young woman, could be failed by the criminal justice system. It is worth noting here that Moss does not get any more specific about Jay's mental health or her charge than that – indeed, many of Clean Break's plays pose critical questions to state apparatus that is designed to protect the marginalised, but that often ends up perpetuating inequalities and injustice.<sup>viii</sup> The

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reasons, according to feminist criminologists, range from cycles of poverty to racial and ethnic marginalisation (Carlton & Segrave, 2013; Gelsthorpe and Morris, 2002; Heidensohn, 1996; 2012; Smart, 1977; Stern, 1989). In this play there is no evocation of Jay's crime, no mention of her guilt or innocence, but rather, the focus is on the relationships between generations of mothers and daughters, refracted through the imagery of systemic institutional failures.

The well-known conversation between Angela Davis and Gina Dent (2001) casts the 'prison as border', a characterisation stemming from the marking out of ontologies of freedom vs. incarceration instead of the more usual demarcation of nation states. This prison/ borderland is both a spatial site of uncertainty and marks out the legal rights and responsibilities on the bodies of those incarcerated there. The deployment of borders here is instructive in thinking about the ways in which theatre spaces operate as borderlands too – outside of 'real' time, 'normal' life and the rules that govern our usually conservative optic imaginaries. Instead theatre's potential is in its capacity to shift the territories of understanding, engagement and imagination and release audiences anew. This is, of course, utopian and relies on the potential for work rooted in social justice to contribute towards wider political projects. In the case of Clean Break, this is an explicitly feminist approach.

### ***It felt empty: Criminalising dreams and desires***

The second performance I will analyse here is another Clean Break commission - Lucy Kirkwood's *it felt empty when the heart went at first but it's alright now* (Arcola, 2009).<sup>ix</sup> Like *Fatal Light* (Moss, 2011), this work also relies on a reversed achronological time sequence that maintains a sense of actions and their consequences. However, it relies on dreamscapes and uses promenade, breaking the predominance of realism as aesthetic mode of prison drama.<sup>x</sup> As in the prior example, audiences

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are asked to question the legitimacy of consequences of arrest when the suspect is herself a victim of the crime of sex-trafficking.

The play is mostly a dramatic monologue presented by Dijana Polančec, an Eastern European woman who, we quickly learn, is a sex-worker.<sup>xi</sup> Part One has the audience seated in a small room around a bed, where we witness Dijana preparing for her 'last client'. She admits to us that she has worked out her 'numbers' – that she had been led to believe she would be freed after she bought her freedom with £20,000 gathered through sexual labour. Dijana's impressive capacity for calculations sets a parameter – a sensible framework – to her incarceration by the traffickers, one of whom is called Babac. In this first section, our proximity to the woman's body stimulates the sense of witnessing her abuse at the hands of up to thirty men every day – while the only body actually present in the space is Dijana's. The section ends with Dijana promising to come and find someone in Brighton. She has directed her promises of escape in the first scene to this unknown 'little clown' (2009: 8). We imagine that Dijana has been forcibly parted from her child, and that she will attempt to find her in Brighton when she regains her freedom. Dijana holds onto an image of her reunion with the child on Brighton Pier, where she promises they will eat chips together.

Part Two partially explains Dijana's escape. After we move through a liminal space between the room in the brothel, following Dijana, who has climbed through an air vent in the wall, we see her clambering through a transparent pipe. We walk through an installation of kitsch teddies and children's clothes and pause in a long, sterile corridor with miniature doors, and hard benches facing one another. Dijana confesses that she escaped the brothel after Babac is arrested for fraud, and made her way to Brighton, as promised.

In Brighton we ate chips, I had enough money for chips. Not enough money for swimming suit because it was like fifteen UK pounds but it was a big shop and I know what I am doing and Babac's coat have big pockets and the swimming suit it is so fucking pretty and I know you would look so beautiful in it and what am I supposed to do put you in the sea in your fucking underwear? (2009: 23).

Dijana has escaped sex-slavery without the attention of the police, has begged for money to get to Brighton in search of her child, and is subsequently arrested stealing a swimming suit.

At police station, they were shits. Question they ask. The worst was woman police, she talk for like hours and I tell her everything again and then she go

You say you wanted the item for your daughter, Miss Polančec? And the man, he whisper something in her ear like I am not sitting right there, and *then* she go [sic]

Oh.

But she still say it again she say [sic] You claim you take the item for your daughter.

And I know she's got it right there on the paper fucking, in front of her so what a stupid fucking question but I just say Yes.

Then there is a big quiet. And then she go [sic] You understand Miss Polančec, that you are against UK law?



*Beat.*

I say I don't know.

She say [sic] You don't know?

I say No (2009: 22-23).

Dijana's explanation to the phantom-child is interrupted by Gloria – a loud, exuberant cell-mate who initially frightens then pacifies Dijana. Gloria's presence is explanatory, charting the alliances of trust needed for 'survival' in the prison. She also reveals the inequalities in provision of basic rights, such as access to lawyers and healthcare.

Gloria. They send you a lawyer already?

*Beat.*

Dijana. Today.

Gloria. Today? Oh shit. You are *lucky*. I have been waiting time. They never send me one yet. They send you one already? What did he say?

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Dijana. She say. [sic] When ninety-six days are over I maybe leave here and go somewhere else (2009: 28).

Dijana is Eastern European, and Gloria is of West African descent. Kirkwood's treatment of racial and ethnic stereotypes through this middle section puts forward a reflection of what encounters are to be expected in prison. Gloria's overt attention while she brushes Dijana's hair reinforces the tendency of cultural producers (in films, media representations, and theatre) to create typologies of prisoners. She describes various nationalities of the other women in prison, and their shortcomings, and claims that she will protect Dijana while she strokes her arm, and tries to sleep in her bed. 'Gloria will sort them. Anyone touch you. Gloria. Anyone say something. Gloria. Anyone – anything. Gloria. Okay?' (2009: 32).

Gloria's kindness is unexpected, almost maternal. Yet her insistence on touch, and compliance with the lights-out unsettle Dijana, who struggles, and bites Gloria in an attempt to escape from her grasp. The presumed conflation of maternal care, lesbian predation and protection against 'Others' is particularly vicious in this scene. Kirkwood's deployment of character typology is particularly acute here, and she does not move away from the readings of Other women as monstrous. Although Dijana is a foreign woman whose ignorance and naivety lands her in prison, Gloria is 'more foreign' and more threatening reflecting a propensity for hierarchies in the criminal justice system. These hierarchies are evident not only within the daily habitus of women who relate to one another according to what crimes result in conviction, but also according to other categories, and particularly the ways in which the relationships between local/ foreign, 'here/ 'there' are deployed.

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The final scene in the play moves the audience to a large warehouse full of the debris of packing for holidays. We realise we have gone back in time, as Dijana is pregnant, waiting for her 'boyfriend' Babac, who, we are told, has organised a holiday for them. Dijana is talking to her unborn baby as she prepares for their holiday. She explains that Babac took her passport to prepare for the holiday, and kept it in a safe. While she packs, Dijana is answering calls, and organising escorts for various clients. She muddles through an explanation for what happened earlier that day: as she was sent out to clean the rooms occupied by the sex-workers, she meets a woman who used to 'work the phones' but now who 'does this' (2009: 45 - 46). Dijana interrupts her conversation with the unborn baby to discuss holiday plans with Babac on her telephone. Between navigating her relationship with the child's father, her job and the child, Dijana is building a fantasy of a normative family life. She does not recognise the symptoms of control and domestic violence as she narrates her romance, and her excitement about being a mother. In her discussion with the baby, she glosses over the sections of Babac's story that expose him as a cruel and manipulative pimp, and instead focuses on how she can be proud of herself:

And I know this sound like I am like, so full of myself, but I love also how much I can be proud of myself.

Cos I *make* this happen. This morning, when I give my passport to Babac, I look at it and I think

WOW!

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How much has happen since I last went on the plane! I never done nothing brave in my whole fucking life before and maybe I still be stuck in shit-smell apartment married to fucking coach driver but I save money so hard and I book the ticket. And I be brave. And I come here. And I am scared but also I hope. And I meet a man. And I fall in love. And I make you! (2009: 50).

As she waits for Babac to enter the locked room to rub her feet, we notice bloodstains on the back of her dress. They are not explained, as they spread. We listen to Dijana imagining her future with the baby, after the vacation. The spreading stain on her dress demonstrates her loss of the foetus. In the performance, the prior scenes are predicated on our understanding of Dijana as 'mother'; our sympathies for her search for her lost child compounded by her victimisation as a sex-slave. In the final moments of the play, we are offered a way of understanding her victimisation. Having been Babac's 'girlfriend', Dijana's pregnancy, she tells us, is what he calls a 'spanner' in the works (2009: 50). Once Dijana has been subjected to pregnancy and becomes victim of poisoning causing the onset of miscarriage, she is no longer a partner, but a female body as object. Her baby becomes the phantom – an affective presence to which she refers consistently thereafter. This imagery is consistent with an understanding of the haunting spectre of motherhood in which women's identities as mothers suggests a presence of children in their thoughts as they undertake their sentences. In this play, her performance of motherhood, despite the miscarriage, is Dijana's performance for survival.

### **Resisting Typologies: Legibility of women as victim, survivor, or hero**

Kirkwood's play provides a valuable example of analysis in relation to a model that considers categories 'victim-survivor-hero' not as discrete but interconnected and often simultaneous.<sup>xii</sup> This

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is done primarily by positioning the audience as witness to the ways a young woman has been repeatedly failed by society; firstly, by believing that monetary exchange for 'protection' by a strange man in a foreign country is legitimate; and her subsequent control by a boyfriend who turns out to be a pimp. Secondly, her repeated abuse by customers, and the connected profiteering of an unscrupulous man from her sexual labour indicates her victimisation as a sexual object. The failings of the criminal justice system are also alluded to, in which, as feminist criminology suggests, female victims of trafficking are not believed by the authorities, and are presumed guilty of crimes instead of being treated as victims of crime (Erez et al, 2009; Heidensohn, 2012; Prison Reform Trust, 2010). Both Gloria's and Dijana's stories demonstrate the insistence of authorities' readings of foreign bodies as necessarily deviant. Both women are held morally responsible for being in the UK illegally, and being complicit with criminal activities, even though they had little agency in either choice. In effect, the foreign women are punished for being 'out of place'. Kirkwood's play stages the mental health stresses both women experience as overlooked by the system.<sup>xiii</sup>

Kirkwood's decision to include a second performer in the prison cell sequence is perhaps telling. It is as if the cell itself needs several perspectives – both to offer more force to the political positioning of the work by including a range of experiences – and to shift attention from Dijana's internal monologue to another person. In other words, the processes of incarceration demand a social response, and cannot be thought of as internal processes. By having the audience witness two bodies in the cell, Kirkwood demands recognition that the problem of incarcerating women (in this case, specifically, women who are victims of others' crimes), are multiplied. As an aesthetic choice, Kirkwood includes the audience in the sphere of accountability for where Dijana is incarcerated – initially as silent witnesses to her sex-slavery, then as bodies lined up in the prison cell, and lastly in a locked room, sitting or standing amongst the debris of a domestic life.

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In the first and last scenes, Dijana's solitude provides a compelling, intimate view of a woman locked in a single room. The device of having her address her child offers a particular perspective as maternal tutelage becomes the mode through which we understand how Dijana survives in the UK by learning the language, by cleaning, by adding up numbers, and learning to perform sexually for her customers. Yet, Dijana's final speech demonstrates a contradictory position of herself as empowered by undertaking the journey to the UK in the first instance. She narrates her story to the unborn child by engaging the imagination: her heroism lies in her ability to concentrate on the achievements of imagining things differently to how they are now. She is telling a story of a possible future of happiness, fulfilment and independence. Yet, this monologue is inflected with the knowledge that her story is dependent on the powers of a man to lock her up and exploit her labour. Kirkwood's play provides an interesting perspective on resistance (central to feminist criminology), since it seems Dijana's 'resistance' of her initial incarceration as a sex slave and her imprisonment, is through hyper-performance of motherhood. Her phantom child allows her to resist the pain she would otherwise be forced to acknowledge. The child – as perpetual listener to her working through of the trauma of her experiences – is witness.

The model 'victim-survivor-hero' might be re-worked in light of a temporal dimension offered by these plays. In other words, it becomes necessary to unpack the temporal siting of the categories victim-survivor-hero. In *it felt empty when the heart went at first but it is alright now*, Dijana is (in chronological terms) first a hero – brave enough to leave her home country and move abroad – and then a victim of sex trafficking. By the time we see her in prison, she has been 'removed' from the forces of victimisation – namely sex-slavery – and she may be read as a 'survivor'. Yet, we may reconsider the modelling again in light of the ways incarceration itself needs to be examined as

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victimising. From a structural perspective, the play does not offer any possibility to Dijana to escape such limitations. She is always already confined by her foreignness, her 'illegal' status, and her naïve propensity to trust her 'boyfriend'. Kirkwood's choice to explore sex-slavery and trafficking positions Dijana as 'outside'. She has none of the cultural capital, nor access to the habitus that native English speakers would have as they navigate the legal system. Furthermore, as Gloria's character demonstrates, there are structural inequalities in relation to services in the criminal justice system that perpetuate disempowerment, rather than encourage agency. The Prison Reform Trust (2015) cites Olga Heaven, director of Female Prisoners Welfare Project/Hibiscus Project:

Many are young women with a dream of going to a first world country to achieve something but what they are brought in for is either prostitution or some other kind of enforced labour (online).

The play that was introduced earlier in the article in light of its structure, Chloë Moss' *Fatal Light*, demonstrates the need for an understanding of the temporal dimension in relation to the model 'victim', 'survivor' and 'hero'. Even though as audience, we know that Jay ultimately commits suicide, we are asked to imagine how her story might have been different as we trace back her journey. This is where a feminist structure of feeling is important, as audiences gain awareness of systemic failure alongside the affective labour of witnessing loss. The short scenes position the family against the prison system – attempting to glean answers as to why a vulnerable young woman was able to kill herself. The dramaturgy makes explicit the duty of care of the institution in relation to the family. Feminist criminology has argued for a more humane and gender-aware concentration on how institutions care for their inhabitants, as well as disputing the overreliance of incarceration in the first instance (Gelsthorpe & Morris, 2002; Kennedy, 2005).

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Wilcox and D'Artrey discuss representations of women victims as survivors of domestic violence, drawing on media analysis. Their argument demonstrates that discrete categories tend to reinforce dominant positions inevitably inflected by patriarchal interests. In crime stories,

victim/survivor must be 'appropriate victims' fitting into traditional norms of femininity to appeal to readers. "The meaning systems that we apply to the category 'crime' are metaphoric systems; the coherence and consistency of their application operates to sustain certain relations: relationships of similarity/otherness and inclusion/exclusion most commonly" (Brown, 2003: 45, cited in Wilcox & D'Artrey, 2008: 5).

This argument suggests the need for aesthetic choices that make allowance for slippage, contradictions and complications of categories. In other words, there is a need for representations to move beyond simplistic representation of women as objects to more nuanced subjective representations. Pursuing this line of thought towards a view of representations of women in relation to the audience as witness, suggests the need for a break with cathartic closure, neat narratives, and hegemonic dramaturgies. In particular, I argue that contemporary dramaturgies can offer more radical possibilities for resisting foreclosure and the banality of the cell.

The analysis of these three Clean Break plays has developed from thinking through the relationship between audience/ witness, performer/ body, and prisoner/ institution. For each of the female protagonists, the texts and performances draw attention to the implications, effects and affects of victimisation and crime as well as the impacts of incarceration. While some of the characters perpetrate violence and destruction (of public property, for instance), they are each subjected to



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wider patriarchal violence that positions them as victims. It is through their bodies that audiences engage with the women's specific narratives. We are explicitly invited to reconsider the ways we view these incarcerated women by witnessing the ways they perform in order to survive years of abuse, for example. In the examples I discuss, I adopt a critical view on realism as a performance mode. Instead of perpetuating prison realism, I propose that a feminist structure of feeling provides an analytic project that can destabilise realism's insistence on unitary morality. Rather, other performance modalities (such as site responsive, immersive or promenade performance) can propose new perspectives and demand new affective engagement with both trauma and the banality of the cell.

In drawing towards a close, I refer to Nield's body of work dealing with theatre as 'a machine of appearance' (2010: 39). In her work on the border apparatus as a space of appearance and the space of the law necessitating a flux between appearance and disappearance (Nield 2010), Nield draws on empirical examples in order to re-work the potency of 'theatrical', 'performative' and 'performance' as sites of ethical engagement (2010: 43). In the spectacle of the law, incarcerated women are disappeared from the 'real' world, and made to appear in the world of the prison. Yet, as these plays demonstrate, their desires, habitus and hopes do not disappear. Their attachments to the 'real' world are extra-legal. Incarceration may lead us to imagine a caesura in the continuous narrative of people outside. The moralistic assumption that bodies in cells would necessarily turn towards penitent 'thinking' fixes the cell as a non-place. Rather, the women in the plays discussed here are troublesome precisely because they resist the banality of the cell. The playwrights have foregrounded the women's multiple subjectivities, as we are asked to perceive these women not merely as 'wrongdoers' but as mothers, lovers, daughters and comrades, who maintain elements of their resistant agency despite incarceration.

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Jay is present as a ghost from the first moment of *Fatal Light* (Moss, 2011). Although her body disappears from the stage, she is a phantasm of the responsibility the institution should bear in relation to the predominance of suicides in women's prisons in the UK. Nield's evocation of the 'ex-person' (2010: 40) is worth resurrecting here in relation to what Nina Billone refers to as 'civil death' (2009).<sup>xiv</sup> By reworking the broad category of 'women in prison' to include these subjectivities and affective relations, theatrical representations perform an important incision into the fabric of the law. What is at stake is the unpicking of the ways both the system and the wider society treats women while they are incarcerated. The plays perform a function in the cultural landscape of the UK by making visible the struggles of women in prison. Theatre's unique function is the possibility it provides to point towards potential trajectories of undoing the fixity of victimisation, crime and justice. Yet, as I have shown, there is value in engaging with the problematics of representation by resisting fixed or stereotypical tropes. Staging choices are resistant when they explicitly work through the possibilities of embodiment, presence and audience experiences that engender a more diverse range of being together.

### **Concluding remarks**

Performance, as Peggy Phelan (2003) controversially declared, disappears. Its ephemeral nature means that its circulation is limited, specific and live. What this article attempts to do is to consider both live performance and play-texts in order to pose a counterpoint to the dominant replication of cultural materials about prisons and prisoners via screen, image and print media. The aim is to consider the constructions of the *mise en scene* of the punishment of women as well as the

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circulation of constructions of types of women in prison. At its core, the article draws attention to the possibilities of non-realist theatre to engage with prison as agential subjects. The article argues against simplistic 'legibility' of women in prison by, initially 'reading' the ways women in prison are shown by Clean Break's playwrights to be resistant, and positioned as either victims of the system or as monsters. Exploring performance adds to the discourse in cultural criminology by providing the counterpoint of embodiment to the notion of representation as always fixed, mediated character typologies. Finally, the discussion about several examples of contemporary performance seeks to shift the focus from the women directly, and rather towards a mutually imbricated structure of feeling created in the ways audience, performer and space co-construct meanings about women, crime and criminal justice.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> There is also a well-established practice of arts with women in US prisons. Some of the main examples include Rhodessa Jones' *Medea Project* based in San Francisco (Billone, 2009; Fraden, 2001; Warner, 2004); Pat Graney's *Keeping the Faith* project based in Seattle (dance) (Berson, 2008); and the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* project (Jean Trounstein, 2004). These are in addition to the wealth of literary/ creative writing projects that occur in some prison education centres, usually run by local college faculty volunteers. Balfour (2004) and Thompson (1998) produced edited collections attesting to the range of theatre based

practices in prisons and set the ground for a critical understanding of the labour of using performance processes in institutional settings.

<sup>ii</sup> Whilst it is important to consider notions of transformation, desistance and reducing reoffending in relation to arts interventions in prisons, this research relates to representations of characters through the art form of theatre, rather than analysing specific programmes in prisons. Of course, claims for resistance and change within the context of institutions must be considered within the wider macro-level. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.

<sup>iii</sup> Cheliotis (2012a) refers to the need for understanding resistance critically. Resistance is not always destructive, but may also be evident in the ways in which prisoners participate in arts activities as a means of subverting expectations, undermining institutional powers, or of attaining a symbolic capital that serves as an 'unconscious ontological threat to prison professionals and the public' (2012a: 9).

<sup>iv</sup> Storer's *a tender subject* was performed in a secret location in March 2012. (See Walsh, 2012).

<sup>v</sup> This is demonstrated in the 'victory' claimed by Rebecca Lenkiewicz' success on mainstream stages in the UK. This success relates to the commissioning of female writers on stages usually dominated by male authors, such as the National Theatre. I elsewhere (Walsh, 2014) examine this as a hollow victory.

<sup>vi</sup> Jenni Millbank draws on Zalcock and Robinson (1996: 90): 'Women-in-prison films have been identified with various 'stock' elements and archetypal characters, a 'butch corrupt and repressed warden', an 'innocent newcomer', 'the hooker with the heart of gold and the wise and worldly "top dog" who rules the roost' (2004: 160) (See also Carrabine, 2010; Clark, 2005; Cecil, 2007).

<sup>vii</sup> Referring to her research on Filipino women who had been trafficked into prostitution, Roces says that 'the lines between both narratives are fluid and not fixed, as it is acknowledged that victims could become advocates or that the label "victim" was not totally devoid of agency (that is why the women's movements often prefer the term "survivor" to victim) (2009: 270).

<sup>viii</sup> This poses a disjunction between artistic programmes (that necessarily depend on public funding) and more radical community-based organisations whose messages pose a stronger opposition to the criminal justice system.

<sup>ix</sup> In this article I cite the published text but refer to my experience as audience at the staging at the Arcola Theatre in 2009, and thus I make use of the collective 'we' to discuss the experience of the play.

<sup>x</sup> Promenade is a growing trend in contemporary performance in which the action occurs in multiple spaces in a site and the audience must walk around in order to experience the narrative. This is also often called 'immersive' performance.

<sup>xi</sup> There is only one scene featuring another character. Gloria is a West African woman who shares Dijana's cell. The script is written in a form of patois that indicates the second language rhythms in English. Any perceived grammatical errors are accurate notations of Kirkwood's text.

<sup>xii</sup> For further treatment of these collapsing categories in art, see Marmo's (2009) analysis of *The Journey* by the Helen Bamber Foundation- a public installation that aimed to raise awareness of sex trafficking staged in Trafalgar Square and elsewhere between 2008-2009. Her article centres on the engagement of the audience with invisible subjects of trafficked women.

<sup>xiii</sup> These stresses arise from the fear, confusion, and frustration of being criminalised as a foreign national, along with the alienation of prison bureaucracy if people do not understand English. These intersecting oppressions compound the traumatising experiences of immigration detention resulting from sex trafficking (see Erez et al, 2009; Kara, 2009; McKinnon, 2009).

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<sup>xiv</sup> Billone's argument relates to the ways incarcerated populations are denied access to the responsibilities of civilians; in particular, access to the structures of democratic societies such as voting. In the EU, voting is considered a human right that is not eroded by incarceration, but the UK has refused to adopt the legislation that allows prisoners the right to inform choices about how they are punished, rehabilitated and prepared to re-join society. Billone's argument relates particularly to the disruption women (who typically serve short sentences) face in relation to their participation in civic life.

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