Riot Noises: Verbatim Theatre Representations of the 2011 UK Riots and the Limits of Comprehension

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Dedicated to Amelia, who has waited five years
for me to comprehend riot.

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Introduction

British Prime Minister David Cameron, speaking a week after the UK riots of August 2011, described their participants as "thugs" driven by "pure criminality", and claimed: "These riots were not about government cuts: they were directed at high street stores, not Parliament".[1] In Alecky Blythe's 2014 play *Little Revolution*, featuring her recordings of rioters, a man looting a convenience store shouts "Revolution!",[2] while a Hackney barber later comments: "But it's a revolution innit. It's a mini relev-revolution it's a young people's revolution 'n' eh all revolutions have lootings y'know" (47). Can these two distinctly opposed understandings of the UK riots – apolitical, criminal violence on one hand, and legitimate revolutionary resistance against state injustice on the other – both be true? Can the UK riots be comprehended using traditional political ontologies, or do they and their subsequent representations in media, academic criticism, and literature demand a new space of commensurability from which they can articulate their truths? More generally and profoundly, what are the methodologies, strategies, and critical approaches by which those who do not riot can attempt to comprehend the identities, motivations, and actions of those who do – and what is the ultimate limit of this comprehension?

In answering these questions, this dissertation will open with a critical analysis of the identity of the rioting subjects of August 2011, before interrogating the *strategies of comprehension* of these subjects in the texts and performances of two contemporary verbatim theatre plays. In closely analysing these texts, the dissertation will shed light upon the wider limitations of comprehension and commensurability between distinct populations under the reign of late capitalism in the contemporary West. The work will conclude by providing the groundwork for a new *riot imaginary*, a distinctive approach to comprehending the event of riot which will create an opportunity for further productive and generative analysis of resistance and its comprehensions.

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[1] David Cameron, "PM's speech on the fightback after the riots" (speech, Oxfordshire, 15 August, 2011), Cabinet Office, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots.

[2] Alecky Blythe, *Little Revolution* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2014), 29. All further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

The UK riots

The causes and consequences of the UK riots have generated considerable media attention, official inquiry, and critical analysis over the last five years. Rather than join the debate at this stage in the dissertation, this introduction will give a brief overview of the events of the riots.[3]

On 4 August 2011, police officers shot and killed Mark Duggan, a resident of the Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham, London. Duggan was believed by the police to be armed, though this was later established not to be the case. Duggan's death prompted criticism, anger and unrest amongst the Black community in Tottenham, which were exacerbated by inflammatory media coverage of Duggan's death, a widely held belief amongst the community of discriminatory targeting of Black residents by the police, and a lack of transparent communication with the police the following day. On Saturday 6 August, a group of approximately one hundred people walked from

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[3] The following recount makes use of information from: Clive Bloom, *Riot City: Protest and Rebellion in the Capital* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); "England Riots: Maps and Timeline," *BBC News*, August 15, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14436499; "Mark Duggan Death: Timeline of Events," *BBC News*, October 27, 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-14842416; "England Riots: An Interactive Timeline," *The Guardian*, September 5, 2011, http://www.theguardian.com/uk/interactive/2011/sep/05/england-riots-timeline-interactive; Paul Lewis et al., "Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder" (London: *The Guardian* and London School of Economics, 2011), http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/46297/.

Broadwater Farm to Tottenham police station to hold an initially peaceful protest. The crowd grew over the course of a number of hours as police did not come out of the station to talk to the protestors or attempt to disperse the protest, potentially fearing a repeat of the 1985 Broadwater Farm riot which was prompted by the police-related deaths of two Black Tottenham residents, and in which police officer Keith Blakelock was killed.

When the crowd had reached a few hundred people at around 9pm, police attempted to intervene, and videos of police officers apparently pushing a 16-year old girl outside the police station were posted to YouTube. Prompted by the videos, as well as rapid communication between young people on BlackBerry Messenger and social media, and the growing size of the crowd in Tottenham, rioting, looting, and violence broke out across a number of London boroughs. Banks, shops, and shopping centres were broken into; burning cars were used to block roads; shops and houses were set on fire; reports emerged of rioters carrying guns. A lack of police officers trained in public order, as well as the wide geographic dispersion of the areas where the riots broke out, allowed the rioting to proceed almost entirely unchecked. The violence subsided by early morning, but continued from late afternoon until late at night for the following three nights in a growing number of London boroughs and across other UK cities, especially Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester. The riots in London were brought to an end on the night of Tuesday 9 August, with the total number of police officers deployed across London by that day numbering 16,000. Looting and unrest in Manchester and Birmingham continued until Wednesday, but increased police presence successfully suppressed these final disturbances. On 10 August the riots were declared over.

Over the following days, "broom armies", as they were described in the national press, descended on the areas hit by rioting to help with the clean-up effort. While many in the affected communities gave thanks for this immediate help, and for the large sums of money raised in subsequent fundraising efforts to help local shopkeepers rebuild their businesses, other community members criticized what they saw as a patronising and short-sighted attitude from mostly middle-class white people who did not live in the badly hit areas. On 15 August Prime Minister David Cameron gave a speech which restated the recently elected Conservative government's vision of Britain as a "broken society" which required serious government intervention. He described the riots as an expression of gang-related criminality divorced from any political, racial, or social message, and announced in strong terms that the social and judicial "fightback" against the elements of society which had perpetrated them had begun. Apart from dismissing a causal link between Duggan's death and the riot events, Cameron made no comments as to the wider causes of the riots.[4] More analytical commentary in the wake of the riots came from Ed Milliband, the leader of the Opposition; a number of other MPs; and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Wider causes cited by these and media commentators included: political disenfranchisement; economic and social inequality; and a distrust of the police in lower- and working-class areas, especially among the Black population. Many other media and press sources took up the Conservative government position, evoking patriotic images of the post-war "Blitz Spirit" in relation to the work of the "broom armies" and criticising the amorality and criminality of the rioters.

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[4] Cameron, "PM's speech on the fightback after the riots".

The judicial response to the riots was harsh: magistrates were instructed to sit through the night, hearing large numbers of cases; offenders were tried in groups for the purposes of speed; exemplary sentences were given out which far surpassed sentences given for similar crimes in non-riot situations. By 2012, 1292 offenders were given sentences which averaged almost 17 months apiece, with many serving much longer terms. Clive Bloom notes that the social makeup of those sentenced was very varied: "there were teenage hooligans of both sexes and all races, but there were older people, a school assistant who sipped stolen beer and was thus deemed to have 'supported the civil disorder', mothers on shopping sprees, children as young as nine", as well as "religious zealots", "Olympic ambassadors", "graduates", and members of the "wealthy middle-class". Ultimately, finds Bloom, "there were no clear answers provided by their motives, class or ethnic origins".[5]

By 2016, almost all those who were sentenced for their role in the UK riots have been released from jail, but both media and academic discussions on the wider causes and contexts of the events of summer 2011 continue to circulate. Meanwhile, the Conservative government, now in its sixth year in power, continues to promote a policy of economic austerity and a focus on restoring the moral and social stability of Britain. A further consequence of the riots, as shall be elaborated in the following section of the introduction, has been the appearance of theatrical works which explore the events of the riots, and are further united by their identification with the mode of *verbatim theatre*.

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5. Bloom, *Riot City*, 91.

The plays

While a number of theatrical works based upon or inspired by the UK riots have appeared in the last six years, many of which are discussed by Nadine Holdsworth in an article on the field, few have approached the subject with the same fundamental desire for comprehension and avowed approach to commensurability as *The Riots* and *Little Revolution*.[6] Apart from their focus on the London events of the UK riots, the two plays are united by their association with *verbatim theatre*, a technique of writing and performing drama wherein playwrights use, exclusively or primarily, an archive of real-world recordings, interviews, letters, and other documentary material to create plays. This verbatim archive, formed of hours of transcribed material, undergoes a sequence of transformations, usually by the playwrights themselves, as it is first turned into a script, then a stage performance.

The Riots, written by Gillian Slovo, premiered at the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn in November 2011, then transferred to the Bernie Grant Art Centre in Tottenham for another run in January 2012. Notably, the Centre is located within a ten-minute walk of Tottenham police station, where the initial peaceful protest of 6 August 2011 was held. *Little Revolution*, by Alecky Blythe, ran at the Almeida Theatre in Islington from August to October 2014. Both plays strive to strike a balance between representing the riots and their political and social aftermath, although *The Riots* marks a clear divide between the two temporal periods, with the second act dedicated entirely to interviews about the causes and consequences of the riots, while Blythe cuts between event and aftermath at various stages in *Little Revolution*.

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[6] Nadine Holdsworth, "'This Blessed Plot, This Earth, This Realm, This England': Staging Treatments of Riots in Recent British Theatre," Journal of Contemporary Drama in English 2, no. 1 (2014).

In other ways, the two plays are markedly different. Although Slovo's play was written and performed only months after the riots, it features very few words from the rioters, and Slovo herself was "in the Scottish Highlands during the riots", so she watched it on TV while friends in London called and texted her with updates.[7] *Little Revolution*, despite premiering three years after the riots, is comprised entirely of Blythe's own Dictaphone recordings of the riots and events in the aftermath. Like Slovo, Blythe watched the news and kept in contact with friends to see when the riots were occurring, but also ventured into the streets of Hackney during the riots.[8] Furthermore, while Slovo places *The Riots* within the field of *tribunal theatre*, whose works aim to impartially investigate contemporary political issues, *Little Revolution* is a more traditional text of narrative drama. Despite these differences in form and conception, both playwrights are united in their desire to use their plays as tools for illuminating and abetting their comprehension of the causes, events, and consequences of the UK riots, and to subsequently build a space of shared understanding between those who riot and those who do not, within the realm of the theatre and beyond.

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[7] Gillian Slovo, "Writing *The Riots*," Theartsdesk.com, November 23, 2011, http://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/gillian-slovo-writing-riots.

[8] Blythe, *Little Revolution*, 5-7.

Chapter One: Surplus, Subaltern, Verbatim: The Subject of Riot

This chapter examines a range of contemporary theoretical approaches to the understanding of riot subjectivity. Opening with an analysis of the UK Government's own definitions of riot and comprehensions of the riot subject, the discussion proceeds into a statistical survey of the people who came before the courts for their participation in the UK riots, developing a comprehensive picture of the socio-political makeup of this section of the population. Comprehensions of the subject of riot in the work of philosophers Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, and Joshua Clover are then critically analysed, particularly Clover's understanding of the subject of riot as formed from the systemic precarities and resistant modes of the surplus populations of Western late capitalism. The chapter concludes with an examination of the subaltern figure in the West as the specific subject of the biopolitical conception of the surplus population, and positions the strategies and modes of verbatim theatre as providing a powerful tool in comprehending the political location of the subaltern in the contemporary context.

The subject of riot

To articulate an argument regarding the strategies of comprehension of riot in verbatim theatre, the concepts of the riot itself and of *riot subjects* – those who create, perform, and cause riot – must be clearly understood. The UK Government's legal understanding, defined in the Public Order Act 1986, is based upon the number of participants (twelve or more persons) and the threat or use of unlawful violence "for a common purpose".[9] Legal guidance from the Crown Prosecution Service further suggests that riots may exhibit the following characteristics:

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[9] "Public Order Act 1986, Chapter 64," UK Government, accessed August 2016, http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/64.

- the normal forces of law and order have broken down;
- due to the intensity of the attacks on police and other civilian authorities normal access by emergency services is impeded by mob activity;
- due to the scale and ferocity of the disorder, severe disruption and fear is caused to members of the public;
- the violence carries with it the potential for a significant impact upon a significant number of non-participants for a significant length of time;
- organised or spontaneous large scale acts of violence on people and/or property.[10]

The legal definition of riot, under which the participants of the UK riots were tried, is based upon prior and commonly held definitions of violence and order. The rioter is positioned as Other to "the public", who are by extension the supporters of state-ordained and controlled justice and order. In these essentials, the UK government's current definition of riot has not evolved far beyond the original British Riot Act of 1714, repealed in 1967, which identifies rioters as "any persons to the number of twelve or more, being unlawfully, riotously, and tumultuously assembled together, to the disturbance of the publick peace".[11]

The above definitions of the subject of riot can be supplemented by an examination of the actual populations involved in the disturbances of August 2011. Those appearing before the courts were primarily young (53% were under the age of 20, 26% were juveniles); poor or unemployed (35% of adults were claiming out-of-work benefits while 42% of juveniles were claiming free school meals); and involved in prior criminal activity (76% of the defendants had a previous conviction or caution), though little of this criminal activity was gang-related (13% of those arrested were identified as gang members). Unlike a number of past riots in the UK, the ethnic breakdown of the 2011 riots was mixed: 41% were white and 39% were Black.[12] The *Guardian*/LSE joint study "Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder", which anonymously interviewed 270 participants of the riots, found that only 54% of the respondents considered racial tensions to be a primary cause of the riots. The main causes, deemed by 80% of the respondents as important or very important, were poverty, policing, and government policy.[13] The population of the UK riots was, in summary, predominantly young, poor, and ethnically diverse; much of this population had directly experienced state violence in the form of exposure to judicial or carceral systems. The riots were a violent response to social and economic precarity in the form of systemic poverty and police activity; they were also a directly political act in that they were, at least in part, a response to specific instances of government policy.

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[10] "Public Order Offences incorporating the Charging Standard," The Crown Prosecution Service, accessed August 2016, http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/p_to_r/public_order_offences/.

[11] *The statutes at large, from Magna Charta to the seventh year of King George the Second, inclusive*, vol. 4 (Printed by William Hawkins: London, 1735), 600, British Library, accessed August 2016, http://explore.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/dlDisplay.do?vid=BLVU1&afterPDS=true&institution=BL&docId=BLL01001072842.

This statistical information correlates with what philosopher Alain Badiou, in his 2012 book *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, defines as "immediate riot", the first of three stages of contemporary riot which he goes on to identify. For Badiou, immediate riot occurs "nearly always in the wake of a violent episode of state

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12. "An Overview of Recorded Crimes and Arrests Resulting from Disorder Events in August 2011," UK Home Office, 2011, accessed August 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/116257/overview-disorder-aug2011.pdf; "Statistical bulletin on the public disorder of 6th to 9th August 2011 – September 2012 update," UK Ministry of Justice, 2012, accessed August 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219665/august-public-disorder-stats-bulletin-130912.pdf.
13. Paul Lewis et al., "Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder". It must be noted that this survey, while highly illuminating, gathered data only from those respondents willing to participate in it, and therefore does not provide a statistically rigorous sample of the UK riots.

coercion" – in the case of London, the shooting of Mark Duggan. It is spearheaded by youth, and is "located in the territory of those who take part in it", spreading by "contagion" or "imitation": "Everyone remains *in situ*, but there they do what they have heard it said that others are doing".[14] Unlike the rioters surveyed, however, Badiou does not see a resistant subjectivity developed within the riots. Deploying the UK riots as a specific example of immediate riot, Badiou notes that they were "violent, anarchic and ultimately without enduring truth", which "does not make it possible clearly to distinguish between what pertains to a partially universalizable intention" of the rioters, "and what remains confined to a rage with no purpose other than the satisfaction of being able to crystallize and find hateful objects to destroy or consume".[15] In this declaration of the immediate riot's indistinct subjectivity, Badiou sides both with Bloom's affirmation that "there were no clear answers provided" by the "motives, class or ethnic origins" of the UK rioters,[16] and with the findings of the other major contemporary philosopher to have analysed the specific example of the UK riots, Slavoj Žižek.

In his 2012 book *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, Žižek claims that "the UK protestors had no message to deliver", underlining that their violence "was almost exclusively directed against their own. The cars burned and the stores looted were not those of richer neighbourhoods, they were the hard-won acquisitions of the very stratum from which the protesters originated". This, he goes on to argue, makes it difficult to conceive of the rioters as "an emerging revolutionary subject; much more appropriate here is the Hegelian notion of the "rabble"—referring to those outside the organized social sphere, prevented from participating in social production, who are able to express their discontent only in the form of "irrational" outbursts of destructive violence". Žižek understands the riots as "a consumerist carnival of destruction, an expression of acquisitive desire violently enacted when unable to realize itself in the "proper" way (by shopping)".[17] Badiou proposes a more sympathetic, though no less damning explanation for the widespread looting and destruction of property which occurred during the riots: "when something is one of the few 'benefits' granted you, it becomes the symbol not of its particular function, but of the general scarcity, and that the riot detests it for that reason. Hence the blind destruction and pillaging of the very place the rioters live in, which is a universal characteristic of immediate riots".[18] Ultimately, both Badiou and Žižek find in the UK riots a lack of resistant or revolutionary subjectivity – for Žižek, the riots were "not truly self-assertive",[19] while Badiou finds that they "neither political nor even pre-political".[20] Many of the rioters would be seen to disagree.

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[14] Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2012), 22-24.

[15] Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 21, 25.

[16] Bloom, *Riot City*, 91.

Joshua Clover's 2016 book *Riot. Strike. Riot.: The New Era of Uprisings* presents an analysis of the riot subject which moves beyond a formal search for traditional political agency or radical subjectivity. Clover conceives of riot as fundamentally imbricated within the structures of Western late capitalism, defining it as: a form of collective action that struggles for the affordability or availability of market goods; which "features participants with no necessary kinship but their dispossession"; and "unfolds in the context of consumption, featuring the interruption of commercial circulation".[21] In these articulations of riot, Clover agrees with the legal frameworks which define riot as a violent mass of people; neither does he dispute Žižek's understanding of rioters as subjects "outside the organized social sphere", and of the riot event as imbricated within consumerist ideology.[22] In marked difference to both Badiou and Žižek, however, Clover argues that the "economic destruction and looting" manifest within the riot, rather than being "a deviation from, and compromise of, the initial grievance that may have granted the riot legitimacy", should be understood as "a version of price-setting in the marketplace, albeit at price zero".[23] In other words, the subjects of riot, wholly denied the ability to purchase market goods by their dispossessed status in the capitalist system, demonstrate by their actions that the only methods by which they can join the flow of capital are force or theft. In Clover's understanding, riot is therefore wholly political and wholly economic in all of its manifestations – under the system of late capitalism, violence becomes the only discursive, political, and economic strategy made possible to the dispossessed.

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[17] Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012), 53, 59-60.

[18] Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 24.

[19] Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, 60.

[20] Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 26.

This biopolitical argument articulates riot as a function of the political-economic concept of *surplus*: Clover notes that while the associated concepts of crisis and riot both arise "from dearth, shortfall, deprivation … riot is itself the experience of surplus", fundamentally "of participants, of population".[24] In Clover's understanding, the subjects of riot belong primarily to "surplus populations" – those populations who have been dispossessed, exposed to systemic precarity, or have otherwise had the ability to participate in the labour and wage systems of the Western capitalist system taken away from them, usually by the system itself as it enters a time of deindustrialization, moving labour markets to Asian and South American economies and focusing increasingly on circulation rather than production in the territories of the West.[25] Riot is the resistant response of these populations and the political articulation of their suffering – the Global Social Protest Research Group, as Clover notes, has labelled the wave of global struggles since 2011 the "Protest of the Stagnant Relative Surplus Population".[26] Asking precisely who might be the revolutionary subject of the current "Long Crisis", Clover finds the answer within a biopolitical re-articulation of Stuart Hall's oft-quoted phrase "race is the modality within which class is lived".[27] Holding that "to enter into riot is to be in the category of persons whose location in the social structure compels them to some forms of collective action rather than others",[28] Clover declares that "*riot is the modality through which surplus is lived*":

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[21] Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.: The New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2016), 16.

[22] Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, 53.

[23] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, 29.

[24] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, 1-2.

> To say this is to say that *circulation prime* is the era of *riot prime* [...] *Riot prime* is the condition in which surplus life *is* riot, is the subject of politics and the object of ongoing state violence. Within the social reorganization of the Long Crisis, the public of surplus is treated as riot at all times – incipient, in progress, in exhaustion – not out of error but out of recognition.[29]

For Clover, ultimately, the riot is far from lacking in a resistant subjectivity. Rather, it is overflowing with the subjectivity of surplus – made redundant to capitalist life, exposed to ongoing precarity, dispossessed, and defined not only by its own violences, but by the violences which are the only response offered to it by the social, political and economic structures of Western late capitalism.

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[25] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, 28.

[26] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, 157.

[27] Stuart Hall, ed., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 394.

[28] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, 168.

[29] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, 170. Italics in original.

Towards the commensurability of the subaltern

The conception of the subject of riot as a member of the surplus population provides a powerful theoretical background for this dissertation. In its particular exploration of the strategies by which Slovo and Blythe attempt to comprehend the UK riots in their plays, the following discussion will also engage with the figure of the *subaltern* as it is theorized within contemporary cultural theory. Priyamvada Gopal, in an illuminating critical overview of Subaltern Studies since its inception in the early 1980s to the present day, defines the contemporary category of subaltern as encompassing "'the general attribute of subordination'", the study of whom operates to "shed light on the practices of dominance and resistance outside the framework of class struggle, but without ignoring class itself".[30]

While remaining within the productive overview of postcolonial theory, the subaltern can thus be readily associated with the conception of the surplus population developed by Clover, being the *specific subject* of Clover's biopolitical understanding of disenfranchised and dominated populations within Western late capitalism. Indeed, the positioning of the subaltern as the specific resistant subject of the surplus population is alluded to by Clover, who attests in *Riot. Strike. Riot.* that the "revolutionary subject of the Long Crisis" arises "not in the early industrializing nations but rather in the decolonizing world", where "Capital both sustains and drives colonialism while ensuring the proliferation of surplus populations".[31]

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[30] Priyamvada Gopal, "Reading Subaltern History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 141-2.

[31] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, 163-4.

Given the subaltern's fundamental subordinate relation to the systems of dominant power, and the intellectually privileged nature of Subaltern Studies, the field's crucial undertaking has been an examination of the agency of the subaltern in relation to both power and intellectual discourse. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously declared in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that as long as intellectual work attempts to intercede on the behalf of this institutionally silenced figure, thus denying them agency, the dominating strategies of essentialism and representation have not withered away.[32] Spivak's solution for overcoming the dominance of representation lies in seeking to learn "to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern",[33] a critical position she later reframes as "learning to learn from below".[34] Crucially, however, Spivak argues that even if those in positions of privilege learn to speak to the subaltern, the subaltern subject within critical theory can only ever be a conceptually divided figure, lacking the agency to attain selfhood – thus, a speaking subaltern is not a subaltern at all, but an essentialist construct:

> the assumption and constriction of a consciousness or subject … will, in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever.[35]

In a highly critical assessment of Spivak's argument, Gopal concludes that it lacks a movement towards "the possibility that the subaltern may have a mediated

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[32] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 308.

[33] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 295.

[34] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Righting Wrongs," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004): 551.

[35] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 295.

(rather than incoherent) relationship to both consciousness (of her condition) and agency (to resist)".[36] Gopal offers a resolution to the seeming incommensurability between the subaltern's political position and that of their interlocutors by returning to the pre-Subaltern Studies scholar Franz Fanon: "For Fanon, incommensurability is a *consequence* of the alienation from self wrought by colonialism and not an adequate response to or resolution of it". Rather than embracing incommensurability and incomprehensibility as a given of the subaltern subject, Gopal calls for scholars to "search for a *defiant* and *difficult* … commensurability of human concerns in the face of the legacy of colonialism".[37] This evocation of solidarity in the struggle for the comprehension of Fanon's subaltern subject affirms that the political and social demands of the subaltern can be comprehended only when the "human concerns" which form the common ground between distinct social and political spheres are legitimated and fully understood.

The subaltern in verbatim theatre

The struggles faced by contemporary cultural criticism in its desire to comprehend the subaltern while acknowledging this figure's essential selfhood are mirrored in the work of theatre when it turns to events such as the UK riots. Much like contemporary Subaltern Studies scholars, Slovo and Blythe constantly face questions of ethics and agency – are the rioters wholly incommensurable, and if they can be comprehended via a performative process which is at its heart historiographic and archival, is this process ethical, can it resist the lure of essentialist narrative, and can it, ultimately, mediate at all between the two political subjects of rioter and theatrical audience? Extending

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[36] Gopal, "Reading Subaltern History," 149.

[37] Gopal, "Reading Subaltern History," 161.

Fanon's "legacy of colonialism" to include the domination of surplus populations within the stamping grounds of Western late capitalism, texts such as *The Riots* and *Little Revolution*, in their attempt to comprehend riot, participate in the search for commensurability with the subaltern of the surplus population. The dramatic form of *verbatim theatre* to which both works pledge allegiance has historically been understood as a powerful tool in this search – a fundamentally political artistic mode which is uniquely suited to creating spaces of comprehension between diverse social and political spheres.

Verbatim theatre was brought to critical attention in the UK by Derek Paget in the 1980s, but is built upon a medley of older performance forms such as oral storytelling, Brechtian, and documentary theatre. Paget originally defined verbatim as "a form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with 'ordinary' people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things", resulting in plays which are then "*fed back* into the communities (which have, in a real sense, created them), via performance *in* those communities".[38] Verbatim theatre is often positioned as a challenge to the mainstream of theatrical practice; its commitment to authenticity, community, and ethical production and performance is indeed absent from many of the popular entertainment productions which define theatre in the public eye. Deirdre Heddon notes that this conscious resistance to mainstream theatrical practice "implicitly signals the fact that theatre is not usually the site for these stories (the marginalised), and the verbatim model might therefore itself be perceived as a democratising force within the theatre industry”.[39] The power of verbatim theatre, in its ideal, democratising form, thus goes both ways: while claiming a political position from which it can ethically give voice to the marginalised subaltern subject, such theatre can simultaneously challenge mainstream theatre’s systems of cultural dominance and privilege, and ultimately influence political or social change on a wider stage.

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[38] Derek Paget, "'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Techniques," *New Theatre Quarterly* 3, no. 12 (1987): 317. Italics in original.

The political position which verbatim theatre seeks to claim, from which it can extend a stage to surplus populations that are actively denied a voice by dominant cultural and social systems, is necessarily, and often uneasily, imbricated within the ethical sphere. The ethics of the uses and presentations of the subaltern voice in verbatim theatre have been critiqued by numerous scholars. Paget’s own analysis of twenty-first century verbatim theatre productions suggests that the pursuit of “an audience’s empathy” through the clear marking of the “absent presences” of “vulnerable groups” remains the key goal of ethically engaged and politically committed verbatim theatre. This marking allows for “circuits of commitment” to be extended between theatre practitioners and audience communities, ultimately creating “fundamental social change”.[40] Work in Subaltern Studies suggests that the continual marking of the presence of the subaltern’s absence is achieved by a performance of the subaltern’s verbatim words that resists processes of division and essentialism. The subaltern’s voice thus sounds as a comprehensible and commensurable polyphony, alive to both subaltern agency and the solidarity generated by politically committed representation. A performance of this kind engages audience empathy with the subaltern's lived reality, particularly the systemic precarity which prevents the subaltern from expressing themselves directly on the stage without the efforts of a representational intervention.

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[39] Deirdre Heddon, “To Absent Friends: Ethics in the Field of Auto/biography,” *Political Performances: Theory and Practice* 4 (2009): 116.

[40] Derek Paget, “Acts of Commitment: Activist Arts, the Rehearsed Reading, and Documentary Theatre,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2010): 175, 177, 178, 181, 188.

The production of solidarity via the marking of the subaltern's absent presences is, naturally, an ideal which has proven difficult to achieve in practice. As Carol Martin writes, "the process of selection, editing, organization, and presentation" of verbatim source material always triggers "a complex set of transformations, interpretations, and inevitable distortions" that occur whenever "documentary theatre takes the archive and turns it into repertory".[41] Nevertheless, these potential distortions are "what infuses documentary theatre with its particular theatrical viability" – a polyphony which marks the subaltern's absent presence gives verbatim theatre "factual verisimilitude" beyond that of simple testimony.[42] The following chapters will examine the strategies of comprehension deployed by Slovo and Blythe in the course of the transformation of the verbatim archive of the street into the textual object of the script and its performance on the stage, and thereby interrogate whether *Little Revolution* and *The Riots* succeed in their goal of producing spaces of comprehension and commensurability between subaltern voices and non-subaltern audiences, or whether such comprehension truly does have objective and insurmountable limits.[43]

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41. Carol Martin, "Bodies of Evidence," *TDR* 50, no. 3 (2006): 9.
42. Martin, "Bodies of Evidence," 10, 11.
43. Sections of this paragraph are adapted from: W00027, "Critical Survey," King's College London, 2016.

Chapter Two: *Little Revolution*

Little Revolution, written by Alecky Blythe, staged at the Almeida Theatre in 2014, tells the story of two communities living near Clarence Road in Hackney, London. Set during the 2011 riots and in the subsequent months, the narrative follows a developing conflict between two particular groups within the local communities. The first, identified by Blythe as "Stop Criminalising Hackney Youth",[44] is comprised of those who give political or social defences for the actions of the rioters, such as the racism of the police force or the power of the systems preventing Black youth from claiming their own space in the city. Most of the members of this first group are Black, and come from within the same communities as the rioters, particularly the large Pembury estate which stands on one side of Clarence Road. The second group, headed by the Friends of Siva campaign which raised £30,000 to help Siva, a local newsagency owner, reopen his shop looted during the riots, is comprised of those who wish to actively rebuild the immediate damage caused by the riots, but avoid pursuing social or political arguments that would legitimize or justify the rioters' actions. These members, mostly white, are external to the precarity of the communities directly affected by the riots, and many of them are also members of the Clapton Square Users Group, living on the opposite side of Clarence Road. This spatial, social and political dichotomy is the key structural element of *Little Revolution,* bringing to mind other roads which are metaphorical signs for social and racial divides, such as 8 Mile Road in Detroit, Michigan.

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[44] Alecky Blythe, "'It Looked a Bit Hairy. But I Had to Go.'," *The Telegraph*, September 4, 2014, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/11067844/Alecky-Blythe-It-looked-a-bit-hairy.-But-I-had-to-go..html.

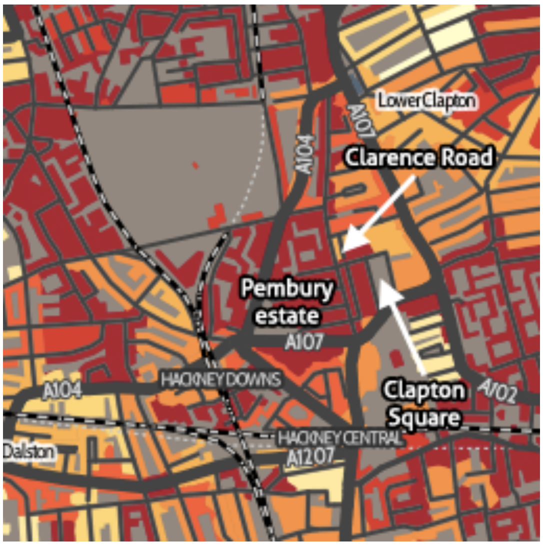

Image 1. *Annotated extract from map of population density of Black African residents in Hackney (based on 2011 Census data). Red indicates higher density of Black African residents; paler colours indicate lower densities.*

The transformational ethics of the archive

Blythe recorded and organised the verbatim archive upon which the script is based, and edited it into its final form as a textual object for stage performance. Blythe has made it clear when discussing *Little Revolution* that she sought to actively acknowledge the various transformations which occurred in her work of transforming archive into theatre. In an interview prefacing the script, she underlines: “Nothing in this play is written or made up. All the words that the actors speak are words that I have collected with my Dictaphone” (5). Blythe’s concern for fealty to her recorded source material is such that during performances, the actors in *Little Revolution* wore earpieces which played the audio recorded and edited by Blythe, speaking precisely in tandem with the people they represented – in Blythe’s own words, “the original accent, intonation, delivery and speech pattern with all the details” (5); within the script, forward slashes indicate the intercutting of simultaneous voices in the resulting natural dialogues. These demonstrations of the accuracy of Blythe’s text, predicated upon the reliability and neutrality of the recording technology used to create it and the audio equipment used to perform it, as well as Blythe’s technique of “collecting” words by locating herself within conversations and situations rather than organizing interviews, all guarantee that the verbatim archive she assembles is, in and of itself, accurate and true-to-life.

While the Dictaphone is a useful and impartial instrument of record, it cannot guarantee that Blythe's own presence in the archive is without bias. Over the course of the second half of 2011, Blythe "collected" the words of her archive by becoming friends with people from the communities around Clarence Road, being invited into their homes, and spending time at their meetings, thus taking few precautions to avoid the manifest ethical pitfalls which arise when a researcher becomes closely associated with her subjects. Blythe demonstrates her awareness of this ethical difficulty, noting in an interview:

> […] I'm dancing with both sides, really, for everyone to talk to me. So I get a little compromised in the making of it by being friends with everybody, which is interesting as that's what you go through when you're trying to capture everybody's voices rather than just go one way.[45]

While Blythe is aware of the problems inherent in her archive-making, her description of the ensuing situation as "interesting" suggests that she is less concerned with avoiding a conflict of ethics than with simply marking it – an acknowledgement, as it were, of the active *presence* of the playwright. Her solution is to introduce herself into the script of *Little Revolution* as the character Alecky, whom she subsequently plays in the Alemida Theatre production. As well as marking the archivist's effect upon the verbatim archive, the character of Alecky acts as a bridge of comprehension between the conflicting politics of the two communities, and by extension, plays the role of accessible author figure to generate commensurability between the cast of her play and its audiences.

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[45] "Little Revolution: Talkback," Almeida Theatre, accessed August 2016, http://www.almeida.co.uk/little-revolution-talkback.

Subaltern absences

Despite Blythe's work towards creating an open and commensurable dialogue between the communities featured in *Little Revolution*, the cast of "real life characters"[46] whose voices Blythe aims to represent includes few characters in truly subaltern positions. The overwhelmingly Black Stop Criminalising Hackney Youth campaign and the middle-class, overwhelmingly white residents of Clapton Square, both of whom Blythe befriends and with both of whom Alecky interacts in the script of *Little Revolution*, are already established voices which speak from socially and politically acknowledged positions. While the structure of *Little Revolution* places these two groups into conflict, both groups already concede each other's presence and legitimise each other's discursive positions. On the other hand, despite the fact that Blythe and her Dictaphone were on the streets of Hackney during the nights of the riots and in the aftermath, Blythe does not make an active effort to find or create a space of commensurability for the rioters in the script of *Little Revolution*.

The play's failure in acknowledging and addressing subaltern absences is made manifest in the following discussion between two mothers from Pembury estate, who hear from Alecky that the Friends of Siva campaign were organizing a fundraiser tea party to be held in Clapton Square:

> KATE. Clapton Square / is such // a far-off cry from Pembury estate /// it really is –
>
> ALECKY. / Why?

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[46] "Little Revolution: Talkback."

> SADIE. // Yeah… Clapton-Clapton Square –
>
> ALECKY. /// Yeah. I know that.
>
> KATE. – it really is. They don't have the issues / y'know the issues are not relevant.
>
> SADIE. / But why do Clapton Square want to have a meeting, organise a meeting for Pembury estate?
>
> ALECKY. No for listen – I got it wrong?
>
> KATE. A tea party? It should be *on* the estate don't you think? / I know. I know, I know. I know 'n' actually, wave goodbye –
>
> SADIE. / It's the same people with the brooms / who came down to sweep up symbolically and wave brooms around – and the Save Siva campaign. We all know Siva we love Siva but-but sorry, y'know, he-he // got caught up in the wake.
>
> KATE. / - No I know we do. // And that sweep-up campaign was to wave bye-bye –
>
> SADIE. Yes.
>
> KATE. – to all those young boys.
>
> SADIE. Yeah.
>
> KATE. – that had been carted away.
>
> SADIE. Yes.
>
> KATE. – and are on remand in prison / but, y'know, I don't see too many people from Clapton Square on remand.
>
> SADIE. / Yeah. No.
>
> KATE. D'you know what I mean? […] And it's nothing to do with Clapton Square. (*Beat*.) I mean y'know some people talk about it and some people live it. We actually live it. (55-56)

The inability of the two sides of Clarence Road to create a space of commensurability does not stem merely from the distinction Kate draws between talking about and living precarity; the secondary and unremarked issue remains that, while Blythe provides space for dissenting voices from Pembury estate, the rioters are not given a further opportunity to speak, nor is the absence of their voices noted or accounted for. Put another way, Kate *also* does not live precarity in the same critical mode as "all those young boys … that had been carted away". Blythe describes the two communities she befriends in the introductory interview to the script as "living very different lives" even as they "all use the same shop – the one that got looted – to get their bottled water and Oyster cards" (8). What Blythe fails to acknowledge as she constructs this dichotomy of different lives is that at the same time as the two communities use Siva's shop, the surplus population from which the rioters come, existing outside of the production and circulation systems which would allow its members to work, and living under a policing regime which automatically locates them within the category of riot, does not have access even to what Blythe enumerates as these basic needs of "bottled water and Oyster cards".

The plight of Siva is deployed in *Little Revolution* as emblematic of differing perspectives on broader strategies of building community commensurability. When Siva is introduced to the Friends of Siva campaign, he is described by Sarah as "a person at the centre of a community and he knows both and rich and poor and that's why he's an important symbol and he is basically the person who is crossing those divides already and we just wanna spread that out" (32). This opinion sits at odds with Sadie's belief that "he-he // got caught up in the wake" of the riots, reiterated by Kate in a subsequent section: "Above Siva's shop, there was nothing to do with looting, pillaging, nicking, robbing – They were not out to damage their community at all" (49). Both of these statements make it clear that Siva's position as a producer of commensurability between different social spheres does not extend as far as the subaltern population of Pembury estate. Indeed, in the corresponding riot section, rioters shout “Revolution!” as they loot and destroy Siva’s shop, casting anti-consumerist violence as a form of political resistance which further complicates Siva’s ability to forge comprehension with the subaltern (29).

Siva is also reluctant to take on the role of building community commensurability throughout the play because the precarity to which he has been exposed, as demonstrated in Blythe’s script, is not limited only to the destruction of his shop, but also to his continued fundamental reliance upon both of the communities who form his customer base: “Everybody ask the same question, ‘Do you think local people done it?’ // I’m gonna serve them again. What can I say?” (45). What remains unacknowledged in *Little Revolution* is the fact that, despite the indisputably precarious position into which the rioters have forced Siva, the resources at his disposal consistently exceed those available to the surplus populations surrounding him, particularly given the fact that the community of Clapton Square orient their desire to take action with a fundraiser exclusively in his benefit, rather than solidarity-based support for the community where the rioters originated. Despite Siva’s reluctance to act as the figurehead of the fundraising campaign, Blythe builds the narrative of *Little Revolution* around his suffering and ultimate success, thereby promoting a position of commensurability with the *particular* precarity of the rioters’ victim, rather than the *general and systemic* precarity of the rioters and the surplus population from which they originate.

The comprehensibility of the rioters’ voices, when they do appear, is complicated rather than reinforced by Blythe’s active marking of her own role as playwright and editor, and the roles of the director and actors as the designers and performers of her characters. Sam Haddow, discussing Blythe's verbatim theatre play *Cruising*, which utilises the same earpiece-controlled delivery techniques as *Little Revolution*, argues that in creating her form of verbatim, "Blythe draws attention to the involvement of disparate bodies in producing the text on the stage", a process which begins with "the interactions of subject and author" and culminates with the relationship of "actor and audience, where the reshaped character is consolidated in the instance of their performance".[47] While Blythe does go to significant lengths to mark the various alterations which occur in the transformation of archive to performance, it is the final transformation attested by Haddow – the interaction of actor and audience "where the reshaped character is consolidated" – where Blythe engineers an artificial and self-acknowledged representational gap. As Blythe says in a response to a post-show interview question:

> On the one side you want to make the drama, you want people to be on the edge of their seats, and you've got press night and that's an important night, but equally important is you've got the night when the real life people are coming as well, so as the person editing it I am in the middle. Verbatim theatre works when you have both sides working together – you've made compelling theatre and the people you've represented feel fairly represented.[48]

In Blythe's understanding, the success of *Little Revolution* as an effective and ethical piece of verbatim theatre in performance rests upon the circuits of commitment it forges with two *always separate* audience groups – a mirroring of the two separate communities who come into conflict during the play's narrative. On one side of

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[47] Sam Haddow, "Playing with the Past: The Politics of Historiographic Theatre" (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2013), 48.

[48] "Little Revolution: Talkback."

Blythe's virtual audience are the press night media and the spectators who come to a performance to be "on the edge of their seats" watching "compelling theatre"; on the other are the "real life people" whom Blythe and her actors have sought an ethical mandate to "fairly" perform. The first group expects a compelling elaboration of the subject matter, while the second will be content with feeling "represented", a position which restricts this group's self-assertive agency. In the few instances where Blythe's "real life people" include subaltern figures, her politics of representation distance them from both the audience and the stage, and in so doing likewise distance the entirety of her audience from an ability to feel empathy for, and solidarity with, the subaltern's lived precarity. Although Blythe reads the combination of compelling narrative and representation as a "working together", the separation of her audience into those who watch a spectacle of subaltern subjects, and those whose identity as subaltern subjects is merely reinscribed by the play, ensures that her subaltern characters never truly attain the status of the truly acknowledged, absently present subaltern.

Noise and incommensurability

While Blythe's edit of her archive and her politics of representation provide an ample stage for both sides of the Clarence Road conflict, the subaltern voices of *Little Revolution* are presented as incomprehensible, incommensurable, and stripped of representational agency. The strategy by which *Little Revolution* pursues this reading of the subject of riot is through active association of rioters with the socially constructed category of *noise*. The association, by dominant systems of power, of the discourse of noise with the resistance acts of surplus populations has been widely noted by contemporary criticism. Kadijah White, in an analysis of the power and authority structures which direct contemporary society's apprehension of particular sounds as noise, notes that in social situations, dominant populations "use the *language* of noise to marginalize sounds (and sound-makers) that violate social mores while expanding the sphere for other dominant conceptions of appropriate sound".[49] The binary opposition of language or voice as a legible form of communication and a legitimate form of control versus noise as a violent and anti-social entity is brought out in studies of specific riot events. Mustafa Dikeç, writing on responses to twenty-first century riots in the *banlieues*, the poor suburbs of French cities populated largely by surplus populations, argues that the state renders "episodic manifestations of discontent [as] acts of violence rather than claims for justice" by "treating the claims rising from the banlieues not as *voices* that question the order of things, but as *noises* that disturb the established order".[50] In *Little Revolution*, subaltern subjects are denied the ability to express themselves in voice, and are instead continually associated with noise, whether they produce it, are party to it, or cannot be heard above it.

The first part of *Little Revolution* alternates temporally and spatially between scenes of the riots and the subsequent meetings of the "steering group" of the Friends of Siva campaign. In this section the riot subject is immediately linked with noise: *Little Revolution* opens with a soundscape comprised of half-heard lines and the sound of distant helicopters, creating an auditory effect which limits comprehension (14-16). At the end of this introductory section, the scene shifts to an early meeting of the Friends of Siva campaign, which is vividly contrasted with the chaos and incomprehensibility

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[49] Kadijah White, "Considering Sound: Reflecting on the language, meaning and entailments of noise," in *Reverberations: The Philosophy, Aesthetics and Politics of Noise*, ed. Michael Goddard et al. (London: Continuum, 2012), 237. Italics in original.

[50] Mustafa Dikeç, *Badlands of the Republic: Space, Politics and Urban Policy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 169. Italics added.

of the riot scenes – in this segment, Alecky and the other characters introduce themselves to each other and note that “there’s a lot of organising to do” (19), while notably avoiding talking about the rioters as individual subjects. This strategy reflects Clover’s reading of state ideology which treats rebels as “reflexive and natural, lacking in rationality, unsovereign, socially determined but not determining”: “To riot is to fail the measure of the human. To fail to be the subject”.[51] The character Tony passivizes the rioters, recollecting “neighbours had things hurled at them” (17), while Alan opines that “events are unravelling very quickly” (19). Sarah, one of the leaders of the Friends of Siva campaign and a member of the Clapton Square Users Group, concludes the section by saying:

> It’s quite amazing that we’ve managed to get this group of people together. / If you – if you want to chat to anyone individually can you arrange later. (20)

The opening Friends of Siva campaign section works to alienate and render incomprehensible the subaltern subjects of the riots from a number of discursive angles: in its placement between two riot sections; in the distinction it draws between the organisation, civility, and rationality of the campaign and the chaos and noise of the riots; and in the strategies by which the campaigners dehumanise the rioters, rendering them as unravelling “events”, while reinforcing the internal commensurability of their own community.

The opening section is the only appearance of the rioters in *Little Revolution*; the rest of the play is concerned with the developing conflict between the Friends of Siva campaign and a group of Pembury Estate residents. The final appearance of a subaltern figure in *Little Revolution* – an appearance which reiterates, rather than subverts,

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[51] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, 166.

Blythe's lack of acknowledgement of surplus populations – occurs in the central section of the play. This section is constructed around an argument between two estate residents, two police officers, and a Black youth who is being stop-and-searched. As the section opens, Alecky approaches a couple of onlookers, one of whom asks her to turn off her Dictaphone, after which Alecky approaches the police:

> *Long silence as ALECKY goes over to the police who are searching the boy and starts talking to another onlooker, without her Dictaphone turned on. We see the action play out but hear nothing.* (59)

Image 2. The stop-and-search scene from Little Revolution at the Almeida Theatre.

Once Alecky turns her Dictaphone back on, the scene evolves into two simultaneous conversations between the estate residents and the police officers, presented by Blythe in two columns of dialogue. While this textual presentation allows the scene to remain true to the verbatim recording in Blythe's archive, it simultaneously creates a disorienting mass of text which makes the scene difficult to parse, effectively transforming the conversations into noise. As one of the residents repeatedly questions the legality of the stop-and-search, the other interrogates the authenticity of the officers' identification numbers, while other onlookers weigh in either in support of the officers or the youth who is being searched. The youth speaks only once:

> MAN ONLOOKER 1. – don't listen to what he says bruv, don't listen – don't be – don't programme – don't make dem programme you my brudda. Dat's why it's good to read you kna - / 'n' know your rights 'n' all.
>
> BOY BEING SEARCHED. / But the longer you talk, the longer gotta stand 'ere innit. (60)

The articulation and silencing of voices in the stop-and-search scene opens a further window into the treatment of the subaltern position in *Little Revolution*. The youth being stop-and-searched is a subaltern figure belonging to the surplus population not only because he appears to have been racially profiled by the police, but because even within a scene ostensibly constructed around him, he does not have an opportunity to speak. Likely he avoids speaking so as to not make his treatment at the hands of the police more difficult or long-winded; he may also not want his voice recorded on Blythe's Dictaphone for fear of identification or retribution. In either case, it is his *not speaking* – along with his visible, but inaudible activity in the minute of silence where Alecky forgets to turn on her Dictaphone – which defines him in the stop-and-search scene, while the onlookers and the police all speak over and across each other, fostering very little of what could be labelled comprehensibility or commensurability between various social positions. Of particular note is that the youth is rendered silent *by* the Dictaphone, a form of recording technology similar to CCTV and the questioning-room recorder. In the hands of the police force, such technology symbolises the systemic strategies of surveillance which identify surplus populations as a vector of previous, potential, or delayed crime and riot, while in Blythe's hands it fails to create a space of commensurability with their precarity.

The diminished agency of the subaltern in the play is allowed its only reconstitution within the space of the Hackney barbershop of Colin, who Blythe notes is instrumental to the construction of her story (7). Colin describes the riots as a "mini-revolution", giving the play its title, and is also one of the few voices in the play to directly acknowledge the agency of the rioters, saying:

> When you see kids throwing bricks and den dey sending messages 'It was the best day of my life,' 'n' you know what musta come off their chest? They first time they probably started a young age that they've actually stood up for something. They haven't had chance, the first time they had been able to express themselves to a bigger – audience. (47)

Colin's seeming awareness of riot as a literal performance of resistance challenges the play's own strategy of transforming riot into incomprehensible noise, though does not change the way Alecky creates her archive. Colin is, however, granted the powerful position of concluding the play as he and Alecky watch, on TV, a police spokesman read a press release about the verdict of lawful killing handed down to the police officers who fatally shot Mark Duggan:

> *COLIN gets back to work. The sound of his clippers and the yelling TV makes it difficult to hear his speech.*
>
> COLIN. They're not, they're not, they're not letting him. There's got to be a better a better, a better way instead of rioting y'know to handle them like that innit? Ha ha. He cannot be heard. / He cannot defend it. He has to go on a programme where there's no interruption isn't it. No one's hearing what he's saying. But they didn't

> hear the people's voice in the first place so why should they hear his voice. (*Beat.*)
>
> Poor man has to go home to his wife after all of that. Ha ha ha ha he he.
>
> SKIN CLIENT: / Can't get his words out.
>
> *The yelling on the TV and the sound of the clippers build into a crescendo.*
>
> *End.* (98)

As in the stop-and-search scene, in this final scene Blythe brings the attention of the audience to the overwhelming quality of noise and simultaneous speech, which prevents commensurability and comprehension, and which harks back to the auditory chaos of the original riot event. As Alecky silently records, the police spokesperson, the shouting crowd on the TV, Colin, his client, and his clippers all sound at once; the crescendo achieved through Blythe's editing of the audio track adds to the effect of disassociated, incommensurable, and overwhelming noise.

Conclusions

The contents of Blythe's verbatim archive and her subsequent editing choices are not a bid for a commensurable position between playwright and subaltern, but remain an echo of the state conception of the subaltern's communication, in Dikeç's terms, as *noise* which must be framed as *voice* before it can be apprehended. Since this transformation of voice to noise is impossible within the narrow framework of "dancing with both sides" which Blythe constructs – a framework which acknowledges only those "sides" which are already able to articulate a legitimate political message – these same archive-creating and editing choices do not allow the subaltern to express themselves *through* noise and riot as a legitimate articulation of resistance. The auditory division and incomprehensibility which features in and concludes *Little Revolution* thus reinforces Colin's opinion that "they didn't hear the people's voice in the first place so why should they hear his voice" – despite the trials undergone by both sides of Clarence Road from the time of the riots onwards, and middle-class Sarah's assertion that "What I'm interested in is the – the spaces between people who've come from very different backgrounds and how do you bridge those gaps, how do you knit a community together?" (82), what remains at the close of *Little Revolution* are two separate communities marked more by their class and racial differences – the noise generated between them – than by their commensurability. Furthermore, the subaltern subjects of riot in *Little Revolution*, whether it is because they are silenced, ignored, or able to express their position only via sound labelled as noise, do not ever locate a space to speak in such a way that the political demands expressed by their performance of the modality of surplus life are comprehended by communities outside their own social and political sphere.

Chapter Three: *The Riots*

The Riots, written in 2011 by Gillian Slovo, was the first theatrical exploration of the UK riots, commissioned and directed by Nicholas Kent, then the artistic director of the Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, London. The first half of *The Riots* is a detailed chronological breakdown of the three days of rioting, performed using extracts of interviews with police officers, local residents, and some audio recordings of the riots, and making extensive use of visual data such as tweets, maps and videos. The second half is an exploration, in an investigative tribunal style, of the causes of the riots, performed as a debate between a number of experts, politicians, community members, and police officers.

The limits of impartiality in tribunal theatre

Slovo's approach to verbatim in *The Riots* is simultaneously less exact and more exacting than that practiced by Blythe in *Little Revolution*. *The Riots* is allied with the documentary form of *tribunal theatre*, rather than the dramatic narrative form of *Little Revolution*. Like Blythe, Slovo acknowledges that as the writer and editor of a verbatim archive "You do have an editorial power because you decide what to include" but adds that in making such editorial decisions, the central goal of her theatrical form is to provide an impartial and unbiased view of the events: "You want to make the audience think – not tell them what to think".[52] In keeping with this statement of intent, *The Riots* was commissioned as an addition to the Tricycle Theatre's corpus of "tribunal plays", produced between 1994 and 2012. This group of works, which "sought to engage, inform, and critique British and International Politics using verbatim testimony to respond to contemporary issues",[53] became definitional within the UK verbatim theatre genre. "Lauded for being a tool for democracy", tribunal theatre has inspired acclaim for its attempts to bring to light narratives of political injustice through tribunals of assembled verbatim voices, including first-person accounts and secondary critical analysis.[54]

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[52] Dominic Cavendish, "The Riots: Duo Who Turned a Crisis into a Drama," *The Telegraph*, November 8, 2011, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-features/8877272/The-Riots-duo-who-turned-a-crisis-into-a-drama.html.

The staging of tribunal theatre is a manifestly political act, a position acknowledged by Kent, who has noted in an interview that he chose to examine the UK riots in a tribunal format "because the government didn't set up an inquiry, and they should have done. They did with Scarman [the report into the 1981 Brixton riots] and a lot of good came out of that".[55] Kent's invocation of the 1981 riots, which the Scarman Report found were "an outburst of anger and resentment by young black people against the police", motivated by "a complex political, social and economic situation", chiefly by a perception of "racial disadvantage",[56] allies Kent and Slovo's exploration of the UK riots with an impetus to comprehend not only the base events of the riots, but also their political causes. Tribunal theatre demands political involvement not only from its writers and performers, but also – and ultimately – from its audience. In the words of Amelia Howe Kritzer, the strength of tribunal theatre:

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[53] Victoria Brittain et al., *The Tricycle: Collected Tribunal Plays 1994-2012* (London: Oberon Books, 2014), back cover.

[54] Will Hammond and Dan Steward, introduction to *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, ed. Will Hammond and Dan Steward (London: Oberon Books, 2008), 12.

[55] Stuart Jeffries, "The Saturday Interview: Nicolas Kent," *The Guardian*, February 18, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/feb/18/saturday-interview-nicholas-kent. Square brackets in original.

[56] Leslie George Scarman, *The Brixton Disorders 10-12 April 1981: Report of an Inquiry* (London: HMSO, 1982), 45, 135.

> lies in the opportunity it gives the audience to consider individual actions, see and hear those individuals defend their actions, and participate in judgement. […] The evidence may be vivid and even dramatic, but the memorable experience consists in drawing one's own conclusions on the basis of hearing and considering the evidence.[57]

The Riots was therefore conceived as an explicitly political play which would fairly and impartially present a wide variety of facts and opinions about the UK riots, and submit this evidence to its audience, providing them with the agency to draw their own conclusions.

Slovo and Kent go to great lengths both in interviews and in the published script of *The Riots* to defend the play's impartiality. Kent, for example, claims in an interview about *The Riots* that "We've never been accused of bias in any of these plays by the press, Right or Left".[58] The scriptbook's blurb, which is the only paratextual information presented with the script, opens with the words: "The Government has so far refused a Public Inquiry into the riots that shook our cities in the Summer of 2011, so the Tricycle is mounting its own".[59] The term "tribunal" is defined by the UK Courts and Tribunals Judiciary as "a superior court of record" where the concerned parties "will give written and oral evidence and their witnesses may be cross-examined" so that "all parties have their case presented and considered as fully and fairly as possible", a definition reliant upon the presentation of truly verbatim evidence.[60] Indeed, for Kent and Slovo, the tribunal format itself functions as the ethical mandate for verbatim representation of the riots and their participants: "The mere fact that we've chosen the subject is our political statement", says Kent.[61] However, no such verbatim fealty is actively demonstrated in the play itself, and indeed *The Riots* consistently undermines its own potential for impartiality within the transformational process from archive-making to stage performance.

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[57] Amelia Howe Kritzer, *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain: New Writing, 1995-2005* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 158.

[58] Cavendish, "The Riots: Duo Who Turned a Crisis into a Drama".

[59] Gillian Slovo, *The Riots* (London: Oberon Books, 2011). All further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[60] "Tribunal," Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, accessed August 2016, https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/about-the-judiciary/the-justice-system/jurisdictions/tribunal-jurisdiction/.

Slovo and Kent demonstrate a lack of commitment to avoiding bias in the early stages of the archive-creation process. By Slovo's own admission, despite her initial "lack of comprehension" as to the causes of the riots, which was her impetus to explore the subject matter in the form of a tribunal play, she quickly came to understand the riots as occurring in two separate phases – a narrative which begun with "a race riot, a riot against the police and a protest about a black man being killed by police hands", that subsequently turned into "an incoherent and destructive cry, an anti-political cry of rage".[62] Slovo's statement is strongly reminiscent of Žižek's understanding of the UK riots as "reactive, not active, impotent rage and despair masked as a display of force, envy masked as a triumphant carnival",[63] and is far from the biopolitical position advocated by Clover. The preconceived narrative with which Slovo approaches her avowedly impartial exploration brings with it the unacknowledged danger of authorial bias, which can alter the content of her own verbatim archive and the structure of the resultant play. Furthermore, as Haddow argues, the play's characters were essentially "cast" by Slovo and Kent in predetermined roles, as in more mainstream theatrical productions.[64] Haddow cites Slovo's answer to an interview question:

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61. Cavendish, "The Riots: Duo Who Turned a Crisis into a Drama".
62. Matt Trueman, "Gillian Slovo: The Riots Act," *The Stage*, December 9, 2011, https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/2011/gillian-slovo-the-riots-act/.
63. Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, 60.
64. Haddow, "Playing with the Past," 43.

> I think that there, it was clear to me from the beginning, that we needed to hear from certain people, in particular I think we needed to hear from a victim of the riots, and we needed some rioters, we needed some police, and out of those central people I built the story […].[65]

From such statements, it can be seen that Slovo conceives of her ostensibly impartial tribunal play as a "story" that is "built" via the transformative processes of archive-creation, editing, and staging, at the same time failing to acknowledge the impact of her own preconceived understanding of the riot event upon the work she undertakes.

The inexactitude of *The Riots*' verbatim form, realised by Slovo's predetermined casting decisions and authorial bias, is compounded by the major textual transformations which her verbatim archive undergoes in its journey towards becoming a play script. Slovo's archive is constructed not from on-site Dictaphone recordings of conversations which are subsequently edited in such a way as to generally preserve their verbatim character, but from a medley of after-the-event interviews between Slovo and various commentators. Slovo's editing process is far more aggressive than Blythe's; dozens of individual responses to her questions are cut together to form a staged discussion where the characters do not directly communicate with each other, but rather present their opinions and answers directly to the play's audience, who take on the virtual roles of interviewers and tribunal judges.

Slovo also edits the verbatim voices constituting her archive more than does Blythe: while Blythe retains a wide variety of the natural mistakes, contractions, and omissions inherent in natural speech, and marks the intercutting of simultaneous voices with forward slashes, Slovo's script is considerably more regularized and formal.

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65. Gillian Slovo, interview with Kirsty Lang, *BBC Front Row*, November 21, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b017cb14.

Partly this is a natural result of the more artificial interview process through which Slovo creates her archive, and partly this is a conscious decision on Slovo's part, as is evidenced by the numerous moments in the script of *The Riots* where "words added to the transcripts for clarification" are marked with square brackets (7). Sam Haddow notes the problems arising from this editorial strategy upon live performance: "Whilst in a printed text, such an addition may be clearly indicated, in performance no such mechanism exists [...] there are seventy nine of these insertions in the first act alone, but at no point in the performance were the audience made aware of their existence".[66]

The inexplicit nature of Slovo's editing strategies causes further difficulty when the construction of the play's narrative is taken into account. *The Riots* is structured as a dialectic between two opposing camps within a tribunal setting – as in *Little Revolution*, on one side are those who argue towards a justification or rational explanation for the rioters' actions, while on the other are those who perceive them as expressions of pure criminality or wanton destruction. The Peckham estate community figure Sadie King appears in both *The Riots* and *Little Revolution* – a presence which reinforces the unacknowledged tendency of both plays to make use of voices which already have an established and legitimised stage from which to speak, at the expense of less audible subaltern voices. The individual positions of commentators are reinforced by their responses to Slovo asking for three words to describe the rioters; these responses range from lists such as "Frustrated. Opportunist. (*Pause*.) And Criminal" (34) to complete phrases such as "Tragic lost souls" (51). These three-word replies, which come at the ends of commentator's verdicts in the second half of the play, make Slovo's active editing of the verbatim interviews more apparent: in most cases, it is clear that the responses have been smoothly combined with the main arguments despite occurring at different points in the interviews.

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[66] Haddow, "Playing with the Past," 49.

This construction of flow accentuates the absence of Slovo's own voice in *The Riots*. Unlike the active presence of the character Alecky in *Little Revolution*, the lack of an archivist/interviewer character in *The Riots*, when coupled with the play's avowed allegiance to the even-handed tribunal theatre format, provides *The Riots* with an aura of implicit yet not directly demonstrated documentary neutrality. When it comes to explicitly political verbatim theatre's central aim of building circuits of commitment and solidarity between performance and audience, this absence of editorial transparency and lack of acknowledgement of the transformations performed upon the archive place *The Riots* into an ethically uneasy space. Although Slovo wishes to "make the audience think – not tell them what to think", her presentation of evidence is biased and tacitly modified from its inception onwards, and the judgements at which her audiences arrive can therefore be seen as inadmissible within the play's tribunal format – a conclusion which undermines the core participatory principle of tribunal theatre.

Representations of the Other

In both *The Riots* and *Little Revolution*, the division between the two disputing sides is emphasised by the presence of an outsider party which does not have the ability or desire to join in with the discourse developed in the text. In *Little Revolution* this role is taken in a marked mode by Alecky and, as has been argued in the previous chapter, in an unacknowledged mode by the rioters. *The Riots* explicitly and consciously places the rioters in this middle position. At the beginning of the play the stage directions read:

> *MAN 1 and MAN 2 on stage but they cannot be clearly seen. It is almost as if they are disembodied voices. They are rioters and, like MAN 3, who comes later, they should be separated from the rest of the characters. They are Other. A world apart from the audience.* (7)

This explicit stage identification of the rioters as Other – a subaltern position – distinguishes the representation of the subaltern in *The Riots* from their representation in *Little Revolution*. While Blythe does not acknowledge the ways in which her text either omits subaltern voices, or transforms them into noise, Slovo deliberately locates her subaltern figures on the stage and in the script in such a way that their Otherness is clearly marked – in other words, she draws audience attention to the "absent presences" of the subaltern figure.[67] Rachel Clements argues that these "unnamed figures do complex – sometimes uneasy – theatrical work" in the foregrounding of their alienated onstage presences, highlighting that the visual differentiation of characters "at least partly replicates the 'them' and 'us' division" between rioter and audience, subaltern and dominant power.[68] As Heddon writes of verbatim theatre's fundamental technique of "telling others' stories": "This 'absenting' of the other is unavoidable in acts of re-presentation – but rather than denying it, there is value to be found in admitting that the other is not, cannot be framed".[69]

The limited amount of speaking time given to the rioters in *The Riots* is likewise an acknowledgement of the impossibility of framing the Other in performance. By Slovo's admission, most of the rioters "were either in prison, or awaiting trial and not allowed to talk, or they hadn't been caught and wouldn't talk" when the play was being developed, a situation which underscores their institutionally silenced subaltern position.[70] While the rioters thus spend much of the play presently absent in the shadows of the stage, their voices appear in the play far less than any others: three rioters were filmed by a documentary crew who offered Slovo their footage, and two wrote letters to Slovo and Kent from prison. While, as in *Little Revolution*, the rioters of *The Riots* do not have an active presence upon the stage, and are not able to communicate with or respond to the other voices that explicate, analyse, and judge their actions, the deliberate marking of this impossibility of locating a commensurable position – a point where both the rioters *and* established voices are under the same spotlight and share an equal amount of stage time – makes *The Riots* a more ethically aware text than *Little Revolution* when it comes to the acknowledgement and marking of the subaltern position.

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[67] Paget, "Acts of Commitment," 181.

[68] Rachel Clements, "The Riots: Expanding Sensible Evidence," in *Performances of Capitalism, Crises and Resistance: Inside/Outside Europe*, ed. Marilena Zaroulia and Philip Hager (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 164-165.

[69] Heddon, "To Absent Friends," 113-114.

The marking of the absent presence of the subaltern rioters in *The Riots* reinforces the play's commitment to forming genuine circuits of commitment between performance and audience, making up for the lost ground caused by Slovo and Kent's alleged but undemonstrated position of tribunal-style impartiality. However, the performance notes for these subaltern voices raise further representational issues:

> *[MAN 1, MAN 2, and MAN 3 (the rioters)] speak throughout in matter-of-fact tones. No heat, no melodrama, just telling us how it is.* (7)

Slovo's stage direction transforms three different voices, which may have originally spoken with what she defines as "heat" and "melodrama" (though the audience is never to know), into "matter-of-fact" reportages of a situation. In doing so, Slovo not only distances the rioters from a genuine response to their own lived precarity and an agentive resistance to it, but also transforms *noise*, represented by "heat" and

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70. Gillian Slovo, "Writing *The Riots*."

"melodrama", into discursively acceptable *voice* – "telling it how it is". Only this telling, stripped of emotion, can be comprehended by the other characters as the legitimate communication of a political position. It is notable that no such stage direction is given for any other voice in the play, and in the stage production, the actors who perform these other characters do so with a variety of emotional and vocal effects as befits their staging and role in the tribunal narrative.

Slovo undermines the representational agency of the rioters further by opening the play, in a manner echoed subsequently by Blythe, with the following stage direction:

> *Large and prominent: photographs and moving footage. The most dramatic that can be found of the riots in progress. Shops being looted, shopkeepers defending themselves. Anarchy on the streets of England. Loud surround sound coming at the audience from different directions. Noises of riot. Of sirens. Helicopters. Shouts.* (7)

It could be argued that, in opening her play with purposefully sensationalized media footage, Slovo fairly represents the mediatized, widespread conception of the riots within the British cultural consciousness – a representation which is then challenged and subverted by the two hours of testimony which comprise the play. However, in locating the "*Noises of riot*" at the onset of the play, and following them immediately with the "matter-of-fact" reportages of the rioters, Slovo appears to underscore, whether subconsciously or deliberately, the incommensurability and incomprehensibility of noise as a fundamental form of resistance by surplus populations. *The Riots* claims, at the outset of its narrative, that only when riot is represented without emotion or loudness can it engage with the active political discourse of tribunal theatre.

Victimhood and the incoherent subaltern

The ambiguous agency of subaltern voices in *The Riots* is highlighted by a comparison of their representation to that of the character Slovo casts as their "victim", Mohamed Hammoudan. Much as Blythe anchors the narrative of *Little Revolution* upon the shopkeeper Siva's personal story of suffering, Slovo centres the narrative of *The Riots* on the plight of Hammoudan, who lived with his family above the Carpetright shop on Tottenham High Road which was set on fire during the riots, destroying his flat in the ensuing blaze. In the first half of the play, Hammoudan takes part in the chronological report of the events of the riots, providing his own story of how he rescued his children from the burning building and remonstrated with the rioters and onlookers outside. At the start of the second act, Hammoudan's role in the play changes. In the stage directions, he is placed onstage in a position which echoes that of the rioters:

> *Throughout this second half MOHAMED HAMMOUDAN sits and watches. He is separate from the rest of the cast.* (35)

While the rioters, in their Othered position as "disembodied voices", can be heard but not seen by the audience, Hammoudan is associated with the active and conscious process of gaze, being consistently visible to both the other characters and the audience, interacting with the tribunal discussion by "*listening to these thinkers, these politicians, community activists and rioters, who are all on stage trying to explain what happened*" (35). Nadine Holdsworth reads Hammoudan's silent presence as offering "a profound commentary on the inadequacy of the explanations in the face of his personal loss".[71] He thus functions as the all-seeing ethical conscience of the play, and the final arbiter of the tribunal's judgement on the riots, a position which is reinforced by his specific identification, in Slovo's casting, with the category of "victim".

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[71] Nadine Holdsworth, "'This Blessed Plot, This Earth, This Realm, This England': Staging Treatments of Riots in Recent British Theatre,": 94.

Image 3. A scene from The Riots at the Tricycle Theatre. Selva Rasalingam as Mohamed Hammoudan is on the right.

Fittingly for his role in *The Riots*, Hammoudan's words are the last the audience hears at the end of the play. Alone on stage "*which is dark save for a spot on him*", speaking over "*a reprise of some of the riot noises but much softer, fading into nothingness*", he says:

> MOHAMED HAMMOUDAN: The thing that really kind of got to me when I got back to, to the fire [was] all these people taking photographs. My house has been burnt down and [they're treating it as a] a marker in his – in history.
>
> […]
>
> I feel, I feel empty yeah. (*Laugh.*) You have to start a new chapter without having erm the the seeds there from the past. You, you can't show people things any more. I can't show 'em photographs.
>
> […]

> Erm. So – So – you almost. Almost it's like y' have to recreate y-y-y-your own history.
>
> [My three words for the rioters?] Just angry people.
>
> *Spot out. The stage in darkness.* (60-61)

This final speech, spoken in silence, contrasts with the crescendo of noise that ends *Little Revolution*. While Blythe argues, through her use of incomprehensible noise, that a space of commensurability between audience and subaltern cannot be found, Slovo's approach is different: in the conclusion to *The Riots*, the space of commensurability narrows to a single spotlit point – the suffering of Hammoudan. While various commentators and even rioters argued for the legitimacy of their own discursive positions over the course of the preceding two hours, the disappearance of all other voices in the finale, coupled with Hammoudan's role as the play's omniscient conscience, suggests that the key voice with which the audience should feel empathy and solidarity is that of the rioters' victim.

The ineligibility of the subaltern subject for the extension of audience solidarity is further reinforced in *The Riots* by the rhetorical association of the rioters with anti-historical incoherence. For Hammoudan, the photograph is a static marker in history, which appears always comprehensible, and holds the semantic power to operate as a "seed" for a future life. The destruction by fire of Hammoudan's family photographs identifies the rioters not simply as violent looters, but as agents of the erasure of history itself. As Hammoudan's previous life is erased, he watches people engage in history-making by taking new photographs of the smouldering building, imparting the riot event and its direct consequences with the same historical weight he had given to his family albums. Hammoudan's three-word summary of the rioters as "Just angry people" is therefore not only a rhetorical understatement that underscores the riots' lasting effects upon the lives of others, but also, in Hammoudan's mind, diminishes the impact of the rioters and their actions upon the making of history. For Hammoudan, he rioters are "just" people who are "just" angry – subaltern figures lacking a legitimate platform to express resistance – rather than political actors with the agency to influence the recorded course of history. Notably, Hammoudan's understanding chimes with Slovo's own understanding of the riots as "an incoherent and destructive cry, an anti-political cry of rage".[72] Slovo's choice to locate Hammoudan's statement in the rhetorically powerful concluding position of *The Riots* suggests an acceptance of bias that further undermines the avowed impartiality of her play, and fails to generate a space of commensurability between the truly subaltern rioter subjects and the audience of *The Riots*.

Conclusions

Due to its numerous lapses of equanimity, *The Riots* can, overall, be read only as producing a judgement of conscience, rather than a critical, even-handed, and impartial judgement such as could be provided by a true tribunal: a judicial form which would ideally avoid authorial bias, explicitly acknowledge any editorial manipulation of testimony, and attempt to comprehend all positions brought before it, not only those of the victims and of established and privileged voices. While Slovo's presentation of the subaltern Other clearly marks their absent presence and the impossibility of truly capturing their dispossessed position within performance, *The Riots* does not perform work to develop a space where the modes of resistance enacted by subaltern figures could be properly comprehended by those outside of the surplus population. Ultimately, Hammoudan's concluding testimony allows Slovo to subscribe to the same strategies deployed by Blythe in her construction of the plot of *Little Revolution* around two established community groups: a placing of the particular precarity, developed during crisis, of those already possessed of a clear voice and ability to form an argument accepted as coherent and legitimate, above the continuous and systemic precarity of surplus populations deprived of a legitimated voice and rendered incomprehensible by their association with the categories of violence, riot, crime, and noise.

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[72] Matt Trueman, "Gillian Slovo: The Riots Act".

Conclusion: Towards a Riot Imaginary

The close analysis of the previous two chapters paints an admissibly negative picture of the ability of verbatim theatre to comprehend the subaltern subject of riot, and thereby to produce a space of commensurability between the systemic precarity of surplus populations and the privileged position of dominant populations. Despite Blythe's and Slovo's genuine and admirable attempts to build circuits of commitment and solidarity between these two vastly different social spheres, verbatim theatre's uneasy desire for both impartiality and authorial control sets very real and fundamental limits upon the ability of its practitioners and audiences to fully comprehend the lives of its subjects. *Little Revolution* and *The Riots* both appear to fall short where the other succeeds: while Blythe ethically marks her own impact upon her archive, she does not recognise the noisy voice of the subaltern as a legitimate evocation of resistance; while Slovo actively marks the present absence of the subaltern Other, she does not acknowledge the authorial bias in her tribunal play.

The conclusion which could be drawn from this summary is, perhaps, that there remains an opportunity for the creation of a verbatim theatre play focused on the suffering and resistance of subaltern subjects, committed to their ethical representation and the building of commensurability in every aspect of its conception, production, and performance. The issue, however, is broader: it is neither the school of verbatim theatre itself, nor its particular manifestations, which are responsible for the continued incomprehensibility of the subaltern, but the dominating and totalising systems of Western late capitalism. As long as political art functions within the bounds of a system that offers privileged audiences and practitioners the agency *to comprehend*, simultaneously placing surplus populations in a zone where they can only *be comprehended*, its resistant and humanising goals are always destined to fall short of their mark.

Holding this in mind, the final short section of this dissertation shall be given over to the construction of a *riot imaginary*. This representational mode, in the words of Spivak, learns to learn from below, because "the lines of conflict resolution" – in other words, the techniques by which resistance to capitalist domination of surplus populations will succeed – are "undoubtedly available, however dormant, within the disenfranchised cultural system".[73] In acknowledging that the life of this disenfranchised cultural system, the surplus public, "*is* riot, is the subject of politics and the object of ongoing state violence", the riot imaginary necessarily aligns its practice with the riotous forms of expression of the subaltern subject.[74]

A political artistic practice which takes the form of riot, derived from and based within the suffering of surplus populations, might seem indistinguishable from the event of riot itself. Precisely this admixture of performance and riot is alluded to by Judith Butler in her recent work on the universal right to bodily appearance in the pursuit of justice. In *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, Butler argues that "assembled bodies … exercise a certain performative force in the public domain",[75] an argument which is greatly expanded in her subsequent book *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*:

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[73] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Righting Wrongs".

[74] Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot.*, 170.

[75] Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Malden: Polity, 2013), 196.

> when people amass on the street, one implication seems clear: they are still here and still there; they persist; they assemble, and so manifest the understanding that their situation is shared, or the beginning of such an understanding. And even when they are not speaking or do not present a set of negotiable demands, the call for justice is being enacted: the bodies assembled "say" "we are not disposable," whether or not they are using words at the moment; what they say, as it were, is "we are still here, persisting, demanding greater justice, a release from precarity, a possibility of a livable life."[76]

When the bodies of the surplus population appear in the public spaces from which they have been removed, they claim a right to the act of appearance itself, along with the commensurability and comprehensibility that all those with the right to perform that act can and do demand. The riot, in other words, is not only the sole act of resistance available to the surplus population; it is also the sole act by which the surplus population can demand commensurability – not only a speaking *against*, but a demand for speaking *with*.

A riot imaginary represents the surplus population in its own terms, through performance-as-riot. As has been argued in this dissertation, transformation through representation distorts the boundaries between self and other, opening a door to the ethical dangers which come when a subaltern figure is represented – or, indeed, not represented – in a non-subaltern text. The mode of theatre formed by the riot imaginary would represent the struggle of surplus populations ethically because *its performance of these struggles would itself be part of their struggle*, and through representation and performance of precarity, such theatre would demand an end to *the precarity to which*

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[76] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 26.

its performance is itself exposed. As Butler writes of the "indexical force" of multiple bodies which make up "assemblies, strikes, vigils, and the occupation of public spaces": "it is *this* body, or *these* bodies, or bodies *like* this body or these bodies, that live the condition of an imperiled livelihood, decimated infrastructure, accelerating precarity".[77] The political artistic practice of the riot imaginary provides this unique form of performance because its bodies both represent and are represented by riot, resistance, and noise.

To conclude, then, with noise. While this dissertation has touched upon the methods by which dominant populations use the language of noise to render the resistance acts of surplus populations incomprehensible and their political position incommensurable, the generation of noise can also be used by surplus populations as a method of commensurability. Kadijah White, for instance, cites Clare Corbould's study of the uses of noise by Black Harlem populations, noting that "black residents used noise to create a counter-public sphere in response to the presence of white landlords, shopkeepers, policemen and visitors … by offending white listeners, black Harlem residents created an aural community through which they could assert black self-expression as a political act". Such evocations of noise as self-expression can be found in the plays examined in this dissertation, even when the plays do not represent its full extent. Much as Colin in *Little Revolution* defends the rioting youth "sending messages 'It was the best day of my life'", arguing that it must have been "the first time they had been able to express themselves to a bigger – audience" (47), community leader Martin Sylvester Brown, recounting his experience in *The Riots*, says:

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[77] Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 9-10.

> It felt like a carnival, it felt like a carnival but without the aggression. […] It was a really strange vibe. Because I'm, I'm here and there's a lot of people, a lot of people I know have got a lot of confidence in each other in the same space. (22)

The riot imaginary forms a space of commensurability between performers by acknowledging and celebrating noise *as* a unifying form of communication, generating further comprehension of the particular sufferings, precarities, and resistance acts of surplus populations. The riot imaginary is *not* riot, because riot will always be incomprehensible. The riot imaginary is riot understood.

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