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The Council Estate as Hood: SPID Theatre Company and grass -roots arts practice as cultural politics

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Introduction

In 2011, in the aftermath of the riots that took place in many of England's major cities, Conservative Councilor Jonathan Glanz, cabinet member for housing, released a statement:

> Social housing isn't a right, it's a privilege and if people abuse that privilege then in common with anyone else they should face the consequences [...]. We have a responsibility to our communities at large. Many people living in these communities are playing by the rules and were not involved in criminal activity over the last few nights. They wouldn't want to live next door to people who are getting away with bad behaviour and enjoying the privilege.
>
> (McCann 2011)

Glanz's statement was issued in support of Westminster City Council's announcement that it intended to evict social housing tenants involved in rioting. In Glanz's statement, as in much of the media response to the riots, residents of social housing estates (or 'council estates' as they are known colloquially[i]), were positioned as central actors in criminal activity.

Glanz's reference to social housing residents is troubling, both because his statement was released before the identity of rioters had been established and because no similar threats of eviction were made towards private renters or owner occupiers. Glanz's words reveal the conflation between deprivation, criminal activity and council estate residency that has characterised popular contemporary conceptions of the urban council estate environment.

His statement, and the wider media response to the riots, which particularly implicated gangs of black males (Ball 2011), illustrates the enduring crisis of the council estate. This crisis includes the poverty and stigma that affects the day to day lives of individual residents (McKenzie 2009) and the related crisis of representation. This representational crisis is epitomised by the popular use of the phrase 'council estate' as a collective description for a variety of different and distinct spaces – connected because they were initially intended to provide mass subsidised rented housing provision for low income households. In its popular, representational incarnation, however, the council estate is a dysfunctional, deprived criminal breeding ground, which poses a threat to those both within and outside of it. Although the 2011 riots are not the central concern of this chapter, the media response to them, and in particular Glanz's warning to estate residents, is revealing in demonstrating the wider status of council estates in contemporary British life.

In this chapter, I argue that the council estate serves as the British incarnation of what Richardson and Skott-Myhre call the 'global hood'. I examine the way that SPID (Specially Produced Innovatively Directed) Theatre Company, a collective of professional film and theatre makers and professional and amateur performer-residents, located on the Kensal House estate in Ladbroke Grove, West London, has responded to the discourse of estate 'crisis' in popular representation. I argue that SPID's work can be considered as part of an oppositional global culture; by framing the company's work as hood cultural politics and examining its complexities through this lens, I propose that its performance work operates through the habitus[ii] (Bourdieu 1977) of those engaged in its practices via the making, performing and viewing processes. I argue that grass-roots artistic work taking place within urban council estates can be positioned as hood cultural politics, and therefore as part of a globally significant struggle for survival in the face of a neoliberal landscape that works to silence the voices of the marginalised[iii].

Global Hood

In addition to the stigmatising narrative inherent in Glanz's statement, his words also

invoke an alternative conception of council estate space encompassing 'community'. Within popular discourse council estates are often subject to nostalgic narratives of community, which reference a fantasy idyll of working class life where sociality and collective identity are associated with safety, stability and mutual support. Positive conceptions of community have been associated with council estates since their inception. The design of many modernist estates sought to incorporate a collective domain, such as a community centre or public square, which would provide areas of social interaction where neighbours might form relationships and forge networks of informal governance. Bauman (2001) has proposed that certain notions of community, however, can be dangerous; he suggests that negative perceptions held by outsiders have often operated to fracture and marginalise already marginalised groups further, as individuals accept external labels and form voluntary ghettos. Bauman's notion of community as a dangerous concept is useful in drawing attention to the way that Glanz's speech worked to invoke nostalgic conceptions of working class 'community' while, at the same time, positioning estate residents as (a potentially destructive) 'other' to non-residents.

The paradoxical narratives of the council estate invoked by Glanz's speech resonate with the definition of the 'hood' (an abbreviation of 'neighbourhood' often used in North American slang to refer to marginalised, residential areas of the inner city) offered by academics and former hood residents Richardson and Skott-Myhre, who argue that the term hood has come to embody

> [...] both the utopian and dystopian aspects of the low-income urban areas of large cities. It represents an awareness of community: an enclosed space in which residents are united in their daily struggles. It also signifies an isolated, marginalized, and often-criminalized space that appears frequently in popular media representations, legal discourses and public discussions.
>
> (Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012: 9)

The 'hood', like the 'council estate', is a representational space of crisis, encompassing a set of diverse and divergent spaces.

Despite its association with North America, Richardson and Skott-Myhre define the hood as a multiple, shifting, global site of marginality. They propose that, because of the appropriation of North American hood culture globally, the 'global hood' has become a conceptual space, which comprises multiple sites of struggle and resistance in a variety of low-income urban areas. This conception of a shifting, global site of urban struggle resonates with Walter's notion of the 'the dreadful enclosure', which, he argues, exists in all parts of the world and serves to identify areas and people as inferior and dangerous (Walter 1972 in Damer 1974: 221).

Unlike Walter, however, who suggests that the 'dreadful enclosure' is a limiting fantasy, Richardson and Skott-Myhre (2012) argue that the hood is a space that 'can be both liberating and limiting' (19). They argue that in its global incarnation the hood is defined by its residents' 'activism, art, personal experience and day-to-day living' and can serve as a site of 'liberation and revolution' as well as one of marginalisation (19). Richardson and Skott-Myhre propose that the 'creative works within the hood and outside of it (re)present a cultural politics' (2012: 22). They highlight Nas's album *Illmatic* (1994) and the movies *Boyz in the Hood* (1991) and *Menace II Society* (1993) as defining examples of hood representation. These commercially successful examples illustrate how hood practices are almost always created by (or with) artists who might be positioned as 'authentically hood'. For example, Nas grew up in The Queensbridge Houses Project, a public housing development in Long Island City, Queens*; Menace II Society* was directed by the Hughes Brothers, half Armenian, half African-American twins who were raised by a single mother in Los Angeles and have suggested that the movie worked within a paradigm of 'art-imitating- life or life-imitating-art' (Takako 2014); and *Boyz in the Hood* stars rapper Ice Cube, who grew up South Central Los Angeles, an area that was synonymous with gang violence and racial tension throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

The creative activity of the hood can be positioned as political because it is commonly concerned with challenging existing systems of power and control in a specific spatial

context – thus meeting Collini's definition of politics as, 'the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space' (Collini in Kelleher 2009: 3). The resistant potential of the hood's cultural politics hinges upon residents engaging in the production of creative works - through which they challenge their marginalised position and survive in a culture weighted against them. The cultural politics of the hood can therefore be defined as a resistance 'against the forces of control and domination', where 'networks of self-production [are] no longer constrained by the axiomatic discipline of the dominant media, the state, or the market.' Importantly, these acts of creative resistance are produced 'within the bounded space of the hood itself' (Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012: 19). According to Richardson and Skott-Myhre, it is from the located hood environment where residents are most effectively able to resist those dominant stigmatising narratives produced about them by those outside of that environment.

Despite the parallels between the North American hood and the contemporary British council estate, as Wacquant (2008) and Kitossa (2012) warn, direct comparisons between urban spaces 'run short of apprehending the distinctiveness of each of them' (Kitossa 2012: 127). While some of the appropriations of hood culture by British artists, discussed below, are undoubtedly rooted in local identification with global forms of resistance, there are marked differences between UK and US contexts. Therefore, the notion of the hood has the potential to work as a potentially reductive, homogenising fetishisation. Kitossa proposes that in much the same way that colonial narratives existed to exoticise the East and create the orient as oppositional 'other', so too contemporary neoliberal societies fetishise the hood (or 'ghetto') in order to create an 'objective structure' of difference in which 'the "non-ghetto" is neither in question nor problematic' (Kitossa 2012: 127). For Kitossa, global hood representation is exoticised and seductive (Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012: 15); this seduction belies a capitalist violence in which the poor are deliberately marginalised in order to sustain existing distributions of power and wealth. His work points to the importance of the non-hood in the construction of global hood discourses, and suggests therefore that the 'non-

hood' must feature in any useful consideration of global hood culture.

Understanding the council estate as an incarnation of a conceptual, global space, despite the problems with this approach as articulated by Kitossa, allows an international contextualisation of the activities that take place there. These located, ostensibly local activities are part of a network of global, grass-roots practices that exist alongside the structures that create the conditions which necessitate their existence.

Surviving the Hood

Couldry (2010) argues that voice, which he defines as the capacity to speak and be heard both within and beyond formal politics, is often obstructed in contemporary social life. He proposes that this is a direct result of market-focussed neoliberal politics and that 'there is no short-cut to understanding neoliberalism's consequences for people's daily conditions of voice without listening to the stories people tell us about their lives' (114).

The voicing and listening process is essential for survival at a grass-roots level because, as Bauman points out, 'the articulation of life stories is the activity through which meaning and purpose are inserted into life' (2001: 13). As several sociological studies of urban council estates have demonstrated, residents have a profound need to narrate their lives positively and to resist the dominant stereotyping that works to structure and limit their life chances (Reay and Lucey 2000, Watt 2006). As McKenzie (2015) points out, survival on a council estate includes engaging in meaning-making activities that attribute value to local practices and enrich the day-to-day experiences of poverty (103-146). Couldry proposes that space is important in the struggle for voice, and that spaces and the people within them need to be regarded as part of the political landscape in order to effectively operate within that landscape (130). The hood, then, despite its limits, has the potential to serve as a conceptual, political space, through which individuals and communities across the globe, connected by their marginalisation from neoliberal politics, and indeed, from all systems where inequality exists, can participate

in the discourse that shapes and structures their daily lives. My analysis of SPID's work articulates the way in which one company operates as part of this global struggle for survival.

Council Estate as Hood

Council estates serve as radical sites for cultural intervention precisely because the experience of living on an estate – including being subject to stigmatising narratives that have created these spaces as marginalised in British culture – profoundly structures and shapes the identities of residents. Indeed, negative depictions of hood spaces are absorbed and replayed by residents, which contributes to the continued marginalisation of such spaces (Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012). However, bell hooks asserts that the margin exists as more than a site of deprivation. It is also a site of 'radical possibility, a space of resistance' (hooks 1990: 149). Her work emphasises the importance of located cultural practices in strategies for survival. As she argues, '[o]ur living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised' (hooks 1990: 149).

Richardson and Skott-Myhre highlight young, energetic, predominantly black subculture - such as that presented via music, fashion and attitude in cultural forms such as hip-hop - as conventional features of hood representation, but acknowledge that the hood signifies much more than this in contemporary culture. While the hood is often associated with predominately masculine, African American culture, in both its North American and its global incarnations these spaces now 'incorporate a plurality of ethnicities and subcultures', because 'global capital and new media technologies have collapsed previous notions of time and space' (2012: 9).

However, just as race remains a central, if complex, component of the North American hood, so too the distinct racial problematics of the council estate are a significant feature of its identity in popular representation. As Power proposes in her case study of Broadwater Farm estate, there is a common perception that race is a 'root cause and explanation of social problems' on estates (Power 1999: 5). Rogaly and Taylor (2011)

point to the common imagery of the white 'chav' - often considered an acronym for 'council housed and violent'[iv] - in representations of the council estate (3). They examine the intersection between race and class by arguing that representations of the British working class are dominated by depictions of whiteness, while ethnic minorities are defined solely by their ethnicity. However, I suggest that, although both nostalgic and derogatory conceptions of the term 'working class', and particularly the word 'chav', may be bound up with conceptions of whiteness, representations of the council estate, especially in popular culture, regularly engage with the mixed-race reality of these spaces. Indeed, particularly in contemporary London and other ethnically diverse cities, non-white groups are regularly implicated in working-class narratives of the council estate. In recent media and political discourse, representations of 'the underclass' have included depictions of black-on-black gang violence as well as the white 'chav'. Fictional representations based on such binary stereotypes – such as the predominately black gangs in Channel 4's drama *Top Boy (*2011 and 2013), or the white 'chavs' in the BBC's comedy sketch series *Little Britain* (2003-2006) - become an easy way to offer superficial reflection on race and class. Such representational stereotypes tend to separate the suburban white working class experience (as seen in, for example, the television programme *Shameless* 2004 -2013 and Andrea Arnold's film *Fish Tank* 2009) from the urban black working class experience, with representations of the latter often featuring a multicultural cast but focusing on issues relating to stereotypes of black subculture, particularly gangs (Attack the Block 2011, Sket 2011). While acknowledging that this division is due in part to stereotyping, I have chosen to focus on 'blackness' in my discussion of the racial aspects of SPID's council estate practices, both because the concept of black-on-black gang crime has become central to public understanding of urban social housing estates, and because the figure of the black male is problematically bound up with conceptions of the 'hood.'

There are many parallels between the North American hood and the urban council estate in popular representation. For example, the physical and socio-economic aspects of the hood are reflected in popular representations of council estate space as

multicultural, marginalised from respectable, middle-class experience (Skeggs 2005, McKenzie 2015) and dangerous to outsiders. Many scholars[v] have pointed to the damaging effect that such stigmatising narratives have on council estate residents. McKenzie argues that negative representations work as part of a series of structures that 'reify' the council estate as the space of the dangerous criminal 'other' (McKenzie 2009:23). As theorised by Bourdieu (1977) and discussed in more detail later in this chapter, these structures also work as 'structuring structures' (Swartz 1997: 103), which contribute to individuals' 'habitus', that is their unacknowledged learned behaviour, in a way that works to limit the opportunities available to them.

In addition to negative depictions of estates, however, so too the 'spirit' of 'liberation and revolution' that Richardson and Skott-Myhre describe as a central feature of the cultural production of the hood has become an important feature of estate representation. One genre where the council estate as hood is particularly evident is British hip-hop music, which draws upon a conventional genre within hood representation to politicise council estate space, celebrate estate culture and resist oppressive mainstream representations of estate spaces. Autobiographical (at least ostensibly) narratives of resistance in the face of poverty and struggle are significant features of British hip-hop music. Artists regularly refer to their personal experiences of living on council estates in their lyrics to suggest that such spaces, like the American hood, are identity-making 'spaces of creative force that is built on a certain kind of survivorship and mutual suffering' (Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012: 19).

For example, British rapper Skinnyman's single and music video *Council Estate of Mind* (2004) draws on the conventions of hood culture to politicise the experience of living on a council estate. The music video for this track comprises intimate shots of the interior and exterior of a council estate from a first person perspective. Affiliation with the American hood is suggested through shots of posters on the walls of the homes within the estate depicting the emblematic American rapper Tupac. The lyrics are darkly humorous and undercut with a sense of hopelessness and, like Tupac's music, can be

read as a cry of despair or a call for political intervention (Richardson 2012: 198): 'I live amongst smashed syringes/squatters' doors hanging off their hinges/hookers looking money for Bobby/shotting their minges'. However, the lyrics also portray a sense of collective experience, of survivorship in the face of desolation: 'So these lyrics are for my people/living on the streets who/know there ain't nothing else to retreat to' (Skinnyman 2004).

The history of the British adoption of hood culture, by both estate residents and outsiders, is arguably tied up with the globalisation and commercialisation of hood identity which has occurred through the successful marketing and distribution of the forms of cultural production mentioned above. The generic conventions of the hood and the youthful, energetic 'spirit' it embodies have been appropriated by global marketing and advertising campaigns, with prominent brands such as Adidas receiving endorsement from hip-hop artists such as Run D.M.C. There are certainly ethical questions to be posed regarding this globalisation of hood culture, such as who profits from such appropriation and how such profits are distributed. As Kitossa proposes, narratives of the hood are seductive and potentially dangerous. The British appropriation of hood culture, particularly via hip-hop music, has been subject to accusations of fuelling American style gang violence. However, rather than focus on these negative aspects of hood appropriation, already well-established in popular discourse (see for example Pogatchnik 2011), I am interested in the ways in which the global hood might have the potential to work as a resistant political space.

Situated on an urban council estate, SPID Theatre Company demonstrates how performance practices that engage with the spaces of marginalisation, and which implicate both the hood and the 'non-hood', might give a voice to the marginalised and celebrate the creativity and dynamism that exist within cultures of urban deprivation. However, just as the hood is a paradoxical space, so too the work taking place in global hood spaces - work that attempts to offer participants strategies for survival - negotiates paradoxes and cannot be considered a straightforward, revolutionary

cultural politics – if, indeed, there is any such thing.

SPID Theatre Company

SPID Theatre Company was established in 2002 and has worked for a number of years to embed itself within the Kensal House estate. In 2005, after securing funding to renovate the dilapidated community rooms, the company moved permanently to Kensal House. Although originally established by a collective of artists from outside the estate, attracted by the performance potential of the community rooms, and perhaps also by the potential they offered to engage with fashionable urban culture, SPID's ongoing work on the site, including a youth theatre company, has led to a number of residents joining the company as youth theatre members. All of the company's work is developed with residents and locals, who suggest subject matter for performances and work alongside professional company members to develop and stage performance works. The company's performance practices include film and theatre and intend to offer opportunities for participants to draw from real- life experience in the creation of work, and to use the performance process to transform the possibilities available to them within their home-space.

Although SPID engages in grass-roots practice, embedded within and driven by the local community, it is also an instrumental organisation, seeking to foster positive relationships with and between the estate and its residents. SPID has also worked to foster institutional connections with a variety of stakeholders. Partner organisations include Kensal House Residents Association, Arts Council England, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, Riverside Studios and Open House London. This network of partners offers not only avenues for funding, which are undoubtedly important for a small-scale company, but also a platform via which work can resonate beyond the immediate locational context of the estate and its residents.

However, despite the positive aspects of SPID's institutional practices, the inherent paradox of hood cultural politics, its 'limiting and liberating' nature, is present in the

work. As Bharucha has suggested, the term 'community' has become particularly troubling in applied theatre practice, as it is often used in an uncritically celebratory manner, 'with scant regard for its inner dissonances and intolerances, assuming an implicit homogeneity' (Bharucha 2011: 370). It is important to acknowledge that SPID does not operate outside of problematic conceptions of community. Indeed, the company relies to some extent on the identity of the estate community as marginalised, and its own identity as an organisation which uses celebratory arts practices to address such marginalisation, in order to maintain the funding and the institutional partnerships outlined above. This is evident in the way that the company frames Kensal House in its corporate planning:

> [Our projects with youth residents] are our way of honouring architect Maxwell Fry's vision of the community rooms as a place where residents recognise their potential to help and entertain each other. Situated in St Charles Ward, which is amongst the top 10% of deprived wards nationally, the residents are a transient group including a high proportion of refugees and a diverse ethnic mix; drug use violence and unemployment are rife. Using theatre as our tool, we see ourselves as catalysts for the regeneration of the community rooms and the estate itself.
>
> (SPID 2009: 8)

I draw attention to the above statement, not because I want to suggest it is a misrepresentation of the lived reality of the estate, but in order to highlight that this corporate framing of the company's work sits somewhat uncomfortably with the challenges to dominant estate representation that the company have made central to its practice (discussed in detail below). This demonstrates the complexities of undertaking located, socially-engaged practice which attempts to address and remedy significant social problems.

Affected: Hood Imagery

SPID's 2011 film *Affected: Greed is Contagious* is set in an apocalyptic version of an unnamed London council estate, and the echoes of hood imagery in the film clearly position SPID's work within the cultural politics of the global hood. In *Affected*, the

estate residents are depicted as violent zombies, slowly driven wild by consumerism and greed - traits personified by a mythical character, the 'tempter'. The threatening presence of the zombie- residents becomes increasingly menacing as two white, teenage, middle class film-makers navigate the estate in search of the 'tempter', leading to their inevitable demise. *Affected* presents a version of the council estate and its residents where both are corrupted by contemporary consumer culture - a vision which, a few months after the making of the film in 2011, was recognised as a catalyst for the England riots. Unlike the media commentary surrounding the riots, however, which blamed the pathological nature of estate residents for their behaviour, *Affected* called the legitimacy of contemporary capitalism into question by positioning the residents, like the middle class film-makers, as victims of this culture.

Throughout the film there are references to hood culture, which work both to position the film within a global hood discourse and also to suggest that the homogenisation of distinct spaces sets up expectations of residents' behaviour that do not necessarily equate with reality. For example, the film opens with a gang of men of different races burning a suitcase filled with cash. Off camera a voiceover asks 'are there any men here? Any real men?' Immediately the camera cuts to a black teenage boy on his mobile phone. In the short pause before he speaks, conventional, reductive hood representation sets up the expectation that he might be a gang member, coming forward to volunteer as a 'real man'. However, it quickly becomes clear that he is a young boy, frightened by the violent activity taking place in his home-space.

The concrete modernist housing block was the central location of the film, and was foregrounded in landscape shots, referencing similar shots of estates in films and music videos such as *Nil By Mouth* (1997) and *Council Estate of Mind* (2004). Although the architecture is different, this bleak, urban landscape with its burnt out cars and lawless inhabitants is resonant of the kind of films Richardson and Skott-Myhre refer to as archetypal hood representations (*Boyz in the Hood*, *Menace II Society*). The home-made quality of the work - the hand-held camera, grainy shots and natural, often stark,

lighting - serves, aesthetically, to suggest that the film is grass-roots practice. Through this cinematography *Affected* invokes and undercuts dominant estate narratives. The low- budget quality of the movie, the references to iconic images of urban deprivation and the oppositional message of the film channel the hood's energy of resistance and survivorship, while also suggesting that the neoliberal flattening of time and space that integrates the council estate into global narratives of urban poverty works to the disadvantage of council estate residents.

Habitus and Reflexivity: *Sixteen* and the Non-Hood

Habitus, as mentioned above, is a theory that proposes social structures contribute to unacknowledged learned behaviour. Simply put, habitus can be thought of as the recognition that 'the human body always carries the effects of the society in which it grew and was educated' (Shepherd and Wallis 2004: 191). Habitus offers a theoretical model through which we can understand the ways that places inform the body and contribute to the opportunities and limitations that exist for individuals from particular places. SPID's live performance practices frequently implicate the bodies of both participants and audience members and the narratives of the estate the company offer often attempt to challenge deeply inscribed behaviours, perceptions and prejudices.

As Richardson and Skott-Myre point out,

> The habitus of the hood plays a crucial role in teaching residents what is and is not acceptable, achievable, and dream-able. [...] Habitus can also make certain practices seem inherent to the spaces in which they occur, as if these practices were only possible in these neighbourhoods and all other possibilities are out of the question. This aspect of culture, as situated in geography, is often confused with nature.
>
> (Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012: 11)

Richardson and Skott-Myhre also propose that the different habitus that exists in distinct class groups feeds into perceptions of artworks, and inevitably leads to different readings of a single representation (19). Thus the theory of habitus might also be used

to explain the negative perceptions of marginalised spaces held by 'outsiders'. Although habitus is often conceived of as a fixed set of behaviours, shared by those from similar backgrounds, it has also been theorised as potentially malleable. This malleability means that individuals who are offered opportunities to understand how their behaviours are structured by habitus might access 'reflexivity' (Sweetman 2003); that is, they might become aware of the structures that limit their life chances, or the life chances of others, and work to re-structure them. SPID's *Sixteen* involved a series of strategic interventions, conceived to reveal and subvert the audiences' (assumed) prejudices, thereby drawing attention to habitual perceptions of estate residents by outsiders.

Sixteen was a professional performance developed by the National Theatre studio and supported by the Gate Theatre, it was produced by SPID and set and performed on the Kensal House estate. The play was about a young woman, October, who wished to use the occasion of her Sixteenth birthday to celebrate the fact that her home, where she had squatted with her father since her birth, had finally obtained legal tenancy status. The strategic interventions, designed to confront the perceptions and expectations of audience members, implicated the 'non hood', as many of the audience members, as the review in *The Stage* (Barnett 2009) suggests, were not estate residents. These interventions had the potential to interrupt habitus in a way that encouraged reflexivity.

A key example of such intervention happened before the performance of the play had begun. As the audience made their way through the estate, towards the community rooms where Sixteen was staged, they passed groups of rowdy teenagers, dressed in hooded tops and jeans or tracksuit bottoms – the quintessence of 'hood' youth. The teenage estate residents shouted abuse at the arriving audience in an attempt to dislocate them from the expected comfort and familiarity of the theatrical experience and confront them with stereotypes of the council estate environment. The staged nature of the encounter was not made clear to the audience until the performance began and the young performers appeared in the ensemble establishing that the 'gang' were part of the performance collective. This was a deliberate intervention, enacted by

performers who were estate residents, parodying a media stereotype of their 'anti-social behaviour'. This uncomfortable encounter attempted to encourage audiences to confront the ways in which their own practices of space, and the expectations of others, were influenced by stigma regarding the danger of the council estate space. Of course, the usefulness of the intervention in this context is questionable; the spectators had decided to attend a performance on an estate, and so likely either did not have negative views of the estate or were willing to have their views questioned. I find this aspect of the performance particularly interesting, however, because of how it worked to highlight the complicity of those from the 'non-hood' in the creation of the council estate 'other'. In beginning the performance with a confrontation of audience members' prejudices and then subverting them by revealing the 'anti-social behaviour' as part of the fiction of the play, the piece drew attention to the role of 'outsiders' in constructing dominant representations of estate residents. This intervention suggested that those from the 'non-hood' have a role to play in resisting the discourse of the council estate in crisis.

The extent to which this intervention worked on individual audience members is uncertain. Indeed, although one audience member I spoke with told me that the young 'gang' had forced him to question his initial reluctance to enter an unfamiliar estate, he also told me of another audience member who was 'so intimidated' that she had left the performance before the fiction was revealed. Nonetheless, for those who stayed, simplistic readings of the performance and its contents, which Richardson and Skott-Myhre might suggest would have occurred as a result of differing habitus on the part of the audience members, were potentially challenged. The habitus of audience members was potentially disrupted, as the disjuncture between reality and representation required some reflexivity on the part of those watching the work. This radically shifts conventional expectations of applied theatre practices, where the participants are often the focus of change or transformation.

Representation and reflexivity in *23176*

SPID's *23176* also operated strategically to encourage reflexivity. The play was performed by the youth theatre company in 2008. It was devised with 13-19 year olds living on the Kensal House estate. *23176* is a secular reworking of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which SPID states was intended to appeal to a 'modern, local audience' (email 2010). The title refers to the number of sexual assaults recorded in the UK in 2008. The play tells the story of a group of young people who discover a woman who has been sexually assaulted on their estate and offer her support, acting against the expectations of the women on the estate – who, hidden in their homes, consider the young people gathering in the communal areas outside as a threatening and potentially violent gang. The play intended to reveal how young people are particularly implicated in negative hood discourse, and also demonstrated how negative discourse shapes and influences perceptions inside, as well as outside of, the estate.

The piece also attempted to reveal the agency that young people on the estate had to break away from the life imposed on them by deterministic representations, and to change the environment of the space they call home. Throughout the piece, the young performers played stereotypical representations of themselves; on stage they were depicted as part of a gang, loitering by the bus-stop that was a central feature of the set. Although subversion of expectations as the teenage gang comfort the assault victim is not, in itself, a revolutionary theatrical tactic, the twist in the plot alongside the use of intermediality in the performance created a platform where young people had the ability to voice their resistance against the kind of negative hood stigmas that create and sustain habitus.

The performance used a number of screens throughout, upon which various representations of the inner city were shown. The pre-recorded scenes included a duologue between two women, set in the kitchen of what appeared to be a flat on the estate. This scene, in which the women ruminated on the threat posed by the young people outside, referenced soap operas and popular drama - both in terms of the mid-shot camera angles used throughout the exchange and the realist, kitchen sink setting.

Another screen depicted a video game set in the urban inner city - referencing the global culture which council estates are part of. On another screen, in a scene that referenced the style of television documentaries, the young people directly confronted representations of themselves ever- present in the popular media. They spoke of their educational aspirations and argued that they had been regularly demonised by popular representation, which failed to acknowledge their individual potential.

The use of screens throughout the performance referenced the ubiquity of council estate representation in screen media and also served to reveal the processes by which the estate is mediated. By revealing this mediation, the performers were able to reveal some of the social and institutional structures which operate to limit residents' life opportunities and through which their limited ability to participate obstructs voice.

However, the making process also importantly afforded the young people involved in it the opportunity to access processes of representation. They took part in filming, performing and scripting their own version of estate space. In this way, the performance process not only allowed the teenage estate residents a space in which to contest dominant narratives, but also an opportunity to experience how such fictional narratives are constructed in the media industry. Additionally, it equipped them with the skills and knowledge to create and disseminate arts practices beyond their work with SPID. Allowing young people to rehearse and improvise counter-narratives in a space where their habitus is structured is a potentially powerful way of offering them tactics for survival both within and beyond the estate. As hooks' 'politics of location' suggests, the fact that residents were able to creatively engage in resistance on the estate where they live gave the work extra potency. While the play itself did not mark a moment of long-term change in the way that council estates and their residents are represented, it did offer the possibility for individuals to engage in reflexivity. It offered participants tools with which to understand the media structures that operate to structure their identity, which is potentially transformative. In *23176*, young people were able to safely capitalise on the potentially dangerous notion of community, in a site where

they felt ownership, in order to offer an alternative conception of their collective identity: one that pushes against the dominant images they are shown of themselves.

Limits and Liberation: Race, SPID and hood culture

As I outlined above, race is a central feature of hood culture, and is significant in popular conceptions of council estate space. However, despite SPID's apparent commitment to confronting negative, dominant estate narratives, race is rarely confronted directly in its work.

The issue of race was directly acknowledged only once in *23176*, in a fleeting moment that took place during the filmed documentary-style scene where the young people confronted media representations of their identity. In this scene, improvised by the young company members, black members of the group described themselves individually and collectively as 'black', despite the fact that there were members of the performance collective from non- black ethic groups. When asked, 'how does the media see you?' replies from the young people included: 'The media sees me like I am a black guy who don't know nothing', 'as a young black hooligan', 'they think just because we're young, we're black, we're gonna start trouble on people. But we're not'.

While the individual young black boys who spoke these words were likely referring to their own positions as subjects of racism, the fact that they used the words 'we' in a context where they were collectively confronting media depictions of themselves potentially revealed racial dynamics beyond individual identity. On the one hand, the young people were voicing their own distinctive identities, while on the other hand, the play and, particularly this specific filmed scene, worked to position the young people as part of a (global) collective. The use of the identity-marker 'black' through the term 'we' operated in performance to suggest that the young people were articulating a shared identity. While this perhaps points to a need for collective resistance in the face of ongoing, intersectional stigmatisation, the performance moment also raised questions about how the articulation of their identity had been mediated during the performance-

making process, and more widely by the global hood discourse filtered into everyday life via film, popular music and the press.

Alexandra and Knowles argue that race is important in navigating the intersections between internal and external identity. They argue that the surface of the skin operates as a boundary where 'external constructions meet and intersect with internal processes of identity formation' (2005: 13). They articulate how racial identity is created through space as well as through and on the body: 'space is a physical environment that materially inscribes racialised meanings, exclusions and dangers; that is claimed and transformed through its use and reimagination' (2). The moment in *23176* where the young people describe themselves as 'black' arguably reveals the process of identity-making that they are navigating and the difficulty they have in finding a language through which to describe their located and bodily, personal and collective identities. It points to the central struggle for legitimacy implicit in grass-roots practices, which, as I point out above, is connected to residents' profound need to resist reductive stereotypes and positively narrate their lives.

The collective identification of the group as black appeared to draw upon external conceptions of economically deprived urban people in political and media rhetoric. By framing the performers collectively as 'black' although there were not all, technically, black, particularly in a context where they were confronting the disjuncture between their external, media-constructed identities and how they see themselves, the performance invoked the kind of pejorative, loaded language – gangs, ghettos – that are applied in various ways to council estate residents and which are related to hood culture and thus racially loaded.

Despite the problems with the collective racial framing of a mixed race group, racial identity is complex and there is also a celebratory element to this articulation of a collective identity. Racial difference has been, and remains, a point of conflict in racially diverse communities (Pearce and Milne 2010: 2). Conversely, however, particularly in locations where the population has not remained largely white, adopting or affiliating

with a non-white racial identity might also become a way in which white residents assimilate themselves into a community and through which the community finds an identity. McKenzie suggests that by adopting the traditions and culture of the Jamaican diaspora, some white residents on the St Anns estate in Nottingham forged a community with a distinct identity (McKenzie 2009: 98). She argues that on the St Anns estate many white working class women 'find value for themselves and their children with a local identity linked to the West Indian community' (349). I would like to draw a connection here between McKenzie's description of collective identity and the 'spirit' of the hood to suggest that collectively referring to themselves as black enabled the young people to articulate a shared, local identity, one 'built on a certain kind of survivorship and mutual suffering' (Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012: 18).

Although the pronunciation of this collective identity in performance might be framed as a celebratory moment, there is a troubling element to the lack of attention that this moment was afforded in the performance and to the lack of attention given to race in SPID's wider repertoire of work, where race and ethnicity are rarely mentioned directly. While the location of the practice allows the company to critique and unpack harmful estate dogmas that prevail in the wider culture, and while certainly these critiques implicate similar and related dogmas relating to global hood culture and connected to race – particularly to black men and boys - directly interrogating the more complex relationships between class and race appears to have proved more difficult. SPID's artistic director informed me that the company does not deliberately avoid the subject in its work; rather, it has not been addressed because the young people have 'not shown an interest in it' (email exchange, 2013).

Despite being engaged in practice that resists stereotypes, it would appear SPID's young company members are absorbing certain stereotypes of the inner city and using them to understand and articulate their position in relation to the outside world. While forcing the young people to engage with issues they have not expressed an interest in exploring might undermine the emergent, resident-focussed way that SPID develops its

performance work, its lack of engagement with the issue of race potentially limits the opportunity of the performance to engage participants and audience members in a useful reflexivity. Although SPID's work often invites audience members to consider their prejudices concerning young estate residents, these interventions work predominately with the spatial relationship between the 'real' and represented. The issues of race, and indeed gender – although predominately male, the performance 'gang' includes both male and female members – are not called into question in the same way. This limits the opportunity for the performance to engage the audience in a more complex reflexivity, where the intersections between race, class and gender on the estate are highlighted and connections are made between the estate and wider, related inequalities.

Conclusion

Reay and Lucey propose that:

> space needs to be made [in academic discourse] for working-class understandings of locality and place in order to counter the hegemony of middle-class versions. Otherwise we will never move very far from representations of deficit and pathology in relation to the urban poor.
>
> (2000: 425)

I would argue that this point extends to dramatic representation, where alternative understandings of council estate space may assist in breaking open enduring stigmas that limit the opportunity structures available to estate residents. The value of SPID's work lies in the ability the company has to create and disseminate alternative depictions of estate space, and to give residents a voice in this process. SPID's practices offer an example of the way that located grass-roots arts practice can highlight the specificity of the council estate struggle, point to the seductive construction of council estate as hood and, at the same time, build upon global traditions of sited resistance in urban environments – which offer residents avenues for survival by giving them the means to share their stories.

However, it is essential that the effects of SPID's work are not exaggerated and that the instrumental nature of the practice is recognised; crucially, it is important to acknowledge that SPID does not operate outside of problematic conceptions of community, which risk reinforcing the discourses they attempt to oppose and isolating individuals who do not identify with the company's vision. Indeed, as I addressed above, the company's existence relies to some extent on the identity of the estate community as marginalised – and its own identity as a radical arts practice which addresses such marginalisation. Nonetheless, SPID's long term engagement with the council estate site, its network of influential partners and techniques for intervening in the habitus of both audience members and participants offers a useful framework for companies seeking to offer marginalised groups strategies for survival. And, indeed, SPID's practice equips individual participants with useful tools for staging further creative resistance beyond the company, both in the immediate location of the estate and via the dissemination of mediatised creative practice on social media platforms where their voices might contribute to an international discourse.

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[i] At the point of their wide-scale inception in the mid-twenieth century, British social housing estates were usually managed by the local council (hence 'council estate'); however, there are now a range of social and private landlords managing estate properties.

[ii] Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' delineates the way that social structures condition a repertoire of behaviours, shared by those who 'practice' similar 'fields'; thus, habitus 'generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions' (1984: 170).

[iii] This chapter builds on my earlier article concerned with SPID's practices (Beswick

2011), published in Research in Drama Education, the Journal of Applied Theatre.

[iv] The term ‘chav’ may have been derived from the Romany chavi meaning ‘child’ (see Quinon ND).

[v] See for example: Reay and Lucey 2000, McKenzie 2009 and Kearns et al 2013.