

PERFORMING COMMUNITY: IMAGES OF INCLUSION AND SOLIDARITY IN SELECTED BRITISH PLAYS

Michał Lachman

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2022.63.5>

Abstract: The article offers an analysis of three plays concerned with the issue of community and its condition in the world dominated by economic, political, refugee, and identity crises. In distinct but strikingly similar ways, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Credible Witness* (2001), Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009), and Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa* (2015) challenge the European consensus about justice, democracy, and community, showing characters who experience the disintegration of the communities they live in and who struggle to form new ones. The three playwrights document ways in which individuals stage their own act of resistance to the disintegration of the community. They also show how they seek to discover what unites them at the time of trial. The theoretical framework for the analysis involves such European and postcolonial thinkers as Ivan Krastev and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Krastev offers a view that the united Europe is facing a similar demise to the one incurred by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Exclusion and crisis of solidarity are among those maladies which Krastev points out as fundamental for the decomposition of European identity. Chakrabarty, in turn, analyses the Eurocentric imagination from the perspective of the history of colonized India. Developing ideas on community (Jean-Luc Nancy, Benedict Anderson, Roberto Esposito), the article suggests that the characters created by Wertenbaker, Butterworth, and Lustgarten are forced to occupy the position of the outsiders. They decompose the "Eurocentric" cultural narrative and need to recast their sense of belonging, by forming new relations and private communities.

Keywords: refugee crisis, British drama, migration, community, solidarity, nationalism.

Sensing the Community

Using Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Credible Witness* (2001), Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009), and Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa* (2015), this article aims to analyse the theatricalization of the collapse and revival of community in recent

British drama. If community is understood as a collection of individuals who share the same language, similar objectives, and common values, the image of community dramatized by these authors proves the erosion of such cohesive mechanisms. The characters of these plays face the omnipresent logic of the community with its political, social, and cultural heritage which ultimately proves either unjust and obsolete, or inadequate. In consequence, they must invent their own vocabulary and system of values, and project smaller, more coherent, if temporary, communities which can define the sense of lost purpose as well as design new conditions for dialogue, stability, and safety. In the plays this challenge is endured diversely by refugees who cross the Mediterranean Sea, the citizens of European states who discover their government's ineptitude in handling crisis, or by inhabitants of an English village who feel alienated both from their cultural tradition and the progress of market economy. Tracing the theme of disintegration and integration, I juxtapose plays which are otherwise dissimilar both in theme and form. Yet, I propose that in these plays Lustgarten, Wertenbaker, and Butterworth offer a challenging rethinking of community. Each questions to what extent the inherited philosophy and practice present in the European cultural heritage can guarantee the stability of traditional systems of governance, and how an alternative reading of European identity offered by outsiders, refugees, and asylum seekers can form lasting, genuine, and flexible models of communal existence.

Community can be defined, after Jean-Luc Nancy, as an entity constituted "by a fair distribution of tasks and goods, or by a happy equilibrium of forces and authorities," but more appropriately it can also be seen as a "living body" composed of the "sharing, diffusion, or impregnation of an identity by a plurality."¹ The need to step away from a narrow sense of singularity into what Nancy calls the "supplementary mediation" (9) of the community stresses how every individual must balance between openness and immanence or relationality and sovereignty, making a decision to explore the unknown territory of new relations and spaces of contact. In this sense Nancy, referring to Georges Bataille, claims that today the "experience of community" means to see it "as space itself, and the spacing of the experience of the outside, of the outside-of-self." (19) Leaving the "self" as a closed-up space and realizing that the "outside" offers a promise of new collective activity provides a chance for renewed existence. Nancy points to the ways Western thinking has suffered from "retrospective consciousness

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis, MN and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 9. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

of the lost community and its identity" (10). This "nostalgia" for a "a more archaic community" (10) is dangerous, because it perpetuates an endless cycle of returns to an impossible utopian notion. The resistance to openness, to accepting the space outside of the "self," and the nostalgic craving for the utopian ideal of a perfect community lie at the heart of modern societies as they are depicted by the three playwrights whose protagonists painfully encounter inflexible rules of belonging. There are at least two important forces which remain active within the community. One is identified by what Roberto Esposito calls the "expropriation"; the subject experiences "removing what is properly one's own." In this way community "forc[es] him to take leave [...] of himself, to alter himself."² The resignation of one's own subjectivity in favour of the group into which the individual blends, risking complete disappearance, goes hand in hand with the institutional development of the notion of national communities. It is also worth noting that for Benedict Anderson, "print capitalism" not only helped to establish "languages of power"³ but also supported the process of "national identification,"⁴ providing the continuity from the declining "religious thinking" to nationalism and turning the nation into a "deep, horizontal comradeship."⁵ In this article, the community is understood as a living and dynamic space which exists outside of the individual. It wields a real power to deprive the person of his or her identity through a complex mechanism of producing coherent logic and vision which stimulates identification with an imposed set of values. Notably, the dramatic characters analysed here reject such an imposition and attempt – successfully or unsuccessfully – to form their own "comradeship," private, unscripted, flexible but at times dangerously anarchic and self-destructive.

Europe is seen here as a typical "comradeship" of the kind that Anderson speaks about, a model example of political and cultural community that is nevertheless deeply flawed. Postcolonial theory has long been active in showing how marginalized and colonized voices, excluded from the benefits of the economic progress or political rights, may formulate their own narratives. For Dipesh Chakrabarty, while deconstructing the story of European economic and cultural power, postcolonial researchers strive to "get [...] beyond Eurocentric histories."⁶ His ideas are expressed in the conviction that "Europe appears

² Roberto Esposito, *Communitas. The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) 7.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006) 45.

⁴ Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 85.

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 5.

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008) 17.

different when seen from within the experience of colonization or inferiorization in specific parts of the world.”⁷ In *Credible Witness*, *Jerusalem*, and *Lampedusa*, the need for such independent stories not only exists with the colonized subjects of overseas territories, but also motivates disenfranchised Europeans. Ceding narrative control to those who have been neglected or voiceless redirects the notion of community into different values and responsibilities. Wertenbaker, Lustgarten, and Butterworth dramatize characters who speak exactly from such peripheral positions, who for various reasons are touched by “inferiorization,” and whose worldviews do not align with those of the group. They are represented as displaced, even if this process does not entail movement in space but merely a mental journey beyond the accepted truths and established protocols. As such they cohere within the critical idiom of contemporary postcolonial studies that aims to subvert the illusion of Europe as a coherent community.

Community of Narrative

In Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Credible Witness* stories of exile confront the discourse of European order and law. The play contrasts experiences of asylum seekers with the image of institutional indifference which has been coded into official protocols established to deal with those who seek safety on the continent. However, on a more philosophical level, the play investigates ethical and humanitarian inability of the community of privileged citizens to accommodate otherness, and to change their well-rehearsed scenarios in order to recognize the needs of others. It is therefore the story of those who are ready to form a new community, to be “expropriated,” as Esposito would put it, and those who oppose them. Refugees who seek safety by leaving their homes are suspended in the no-man’s land of legal limbo, and Wertenbaker’s drama stresses how “asylum seekers are detained between unwelcoming utopias and dystopian homelands.”⁸ What is more, Wertenbaker depicts the refugees arriving at European borders as gifted, spiritual, and artistic. They are met with the hostile formalities of a bureaucratic regime which inhibits a rich history of intercultural dialogue by erecting battlements to secure ‘fortress Europe.’

The action of *Credible Witness* weaves through places associated with control and incarceration from the Heathrow airport and its immigration officers, a detention institution, to a “dilapidated community centre.”⁹ In all of these facilities, the

⁷ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* 16.

⁸ Jane Milling, *Modern British Playwriting: The 1980s. Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) 244.

⁹ Timberlake Wertenbaker, “*Credible Witness*,” *Plays 2* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014) 188. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

internees are defined by the narrow categories of immigration law, whereas their real stories reveal not only a shocking expanse of personal tragedy, suffering, and injustice, but also endless tales of wars, conflicts, and conquest in which Europe and its member states have been deeply implicated for centuries. The play specifically focuses on a Macedonian man, Alexander Karagy, whose life remains in an obvious way a continuation of Alexander the Great, and who enters Europe only to disappear from official records and live as an illegal immigrant. He is then followed by his mother, who not only searches for her lost son but also attempts to start a meaningful dialogue with officials and institutions about the margins of solidarity and compassion. Wertenbaker's play suggests that the European community's panicked attempts to guard safety and exclusivity testifies to its weakness and the death of its founding values.

Nevertheless, new bonds are struck beyond the inflexible, mechanical and depersonalized legal procedures. Paul, who displays some understanding for the plight of emigrants by talking to them and recognizing their needs, pays the price: "At Heathrow I had three different people tell me they were deposed emperors. I was moved here because I believed too many stories." (205) "Here" is the detention centre at which Petra, Alexander's mother, is kept together with other detainees, before her legal status is decided. The clash of values is expressed by juxtaposing the uniform of the guard – wearing it is a "lonely business," as Paul complains (207) – and a literary tradition kept alive by the detainees who are versed in European writing and culture. When Shivan, a Tamil doctor, reads a fragment of *Paradise Lost* about endurance and humiliation, and calls to "share the power of this language" (208), it is implied that the preservation of core values of European civilization lies at the hands of expatriates and emigres. Wertenbaker's work often interrogates the validity of Western cultural traditions;¹⁰ *Credible Witness* intimates that the foundations of Enlightenment equality and the concept of brotherhood, as well as of learning and education, find continuity in the enthusiasm and dedication of those to whom they are officially denied. Those who carry European passports see such cultural tradition as extinct at best, or a dangerous tool of subversion used by the newcomers at worst.

If the asylum seeker or refugee stereotypically has no name, no identity, in Wertenbaker's play characters are given defined identities and very concrete, even

¹⁰ As Jane Milling observes, Wertenbaker's interest in reviewing the cultural tradition of the West made her theatre difficult to assess for early reviewers because her work "probed such crucial questions but [...] didn't seek to shatter traditional modes of representation and often affirmed more about European culture, literature and history than expected." Milling, *Modern British Playwriting* 209.

documentary storylines. They may change names due to bureaucratic procedures, but they are identified by their artistic skills, shared stories of tragedies, representing cultures which originate from rich literary, political, and philosophical traditions that are now being dominated and obliterated by Western historical narratives aiming at defining European identity as central.¹¹ The presence of refugees challenges this sense of community and its alleged internal integrity, opening a path to see all identities as constructed, all common rituals as products of specific social and historical contexts, and thus always ready for change. For as Alison Jeffers stresses, the “presence of migrants, forced or otherwise, offers an opportunity to re-define *all* identities as ethnically produced.”¹² This is also how the “nostalgia” for the old continent and its traditions – of which Nancy speaks – is played out against the energy and hope of new voices.

In the “Prologue” which opens the play, Alexander teaches Greek children about layers of history, and how they accumulate and register stories of nations, regimes, and epochs. He asks them to “go into your villages and discover other layers” (185). Individual people gather their private experience “hidden in the folds of their clothes,” protecting it from “thugs who want to bury the past and level the ground” (185). Wertenbaker shows that the possibility of forming communities lies precisely in the small groups of individuals who share their stories and griefs, and who connect with the suffering of others. In the English community centre in which Alexander secretly works, he collects a group of emigrants and conducts sessions of healing and solidarity in which they learn how to talk with strangers based on mutual empathy and open conversation. “Today we cry for Ali,” goes his instruction (188), and then it develops into a narrative about the journey Ali has undertaken through a number of institutions which admitted and then discharged him, forcing him to assume new names and identities. The refugees’ personal tragedies stand for authenticity, and demand a clear voice and visibility; they require a space for presentation and for recognition in what constitutes a shifting and temporary narrative community. In this way they expose the shortcomings of the official system of processing immigrants, and the inability of the officials to accommodate difference.

¹¹ As opposed to such traditional concepts of stable identity, many theories define it as “decentered,” stressing the influence of migration and the refugee crisis. Cf. Alison Jeffers, *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis. Performing Global Identities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012) 10.

¹² Jeffers, *Refugees* 10.

The community that Wertenbaker attempts to revive is based on a shared language. At one point Shivan observes that “[i]f we don’t share the truth of language, what then? [...] If language disintegrates, there’s nothing left.” (208) This concept of disintegration can be directly referred to what Edward Said says about exile, which he defines as “solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation.”¹³ If community is the opposite state to solitude, then it might be seen as a condition of remaining within or inside, of sharing a habitation which in this sense indicates both a geographic place and a set of practical and linguistic activities which define an individual as a member of the group. Thus, the concept of home means a “community of language, culture and customs.”¹⁴ Wertenbaker’s characters need to discover what language, what culture, and what customs they could possibly share to make their home possible. The reconstitution of the “broken lives”¹⁵ can happen not only through a redefinition of the individual who is a member of the group but also through the willingness of the group to redefine itself. Therefore, Said considers the “cultivation” of one’s subjectivity as a fundamental practice leading to renewing the sense of belonging.¹⁶ In Wertenbaker’s play the potential for real “cultivation” of character and for creating renewed subjectivity resides with the refugees who are paradoxically freer to adjust and accommodate change than the legitimate community which nostalgically guards its unchangeable core values.

Silencing otherness within the play happens both on the level of national politics and personal identity. Aziz, an Algerian staying at the detention camp, complains that “English history says Algerian history doesn’t exist.” (206) Similarly, personal identity undergoes a systemic erasure through both social and economic suppression. When Petra finally meets with her son, she has only one thing to complain about, that is his disappeared identity and dignity: “What kind of life is there when you’re nobody, without a past, without a name, without a heart, a man who doesn’t even cast a shadow.” (222) Emigrants living in detention camps under false names or with no names, with erased connection to their native culture and with no voice to tell the story of their tragedies, are reduced to non-beings. The guards who bend the rules in an empathetic attempt to help them are accused by their superiors of not being “good at authority” (209). The invisibility of the emigrants’ history, the silencing of their voice, reflects a characteristic

¹³ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) 140.

¹⁴ Said, *Reflections* 139.

¹⁵ Said, *Reflections* 140.

¹⁶ Said, *Reflections* 147.

feature of the European narrative of historical and political domination. It is in this sense that Gayatri Spivak perceives a “desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as a Subject.”¹⁷ Spivak calls those who may oppose that strategy the “unnamed subject of the Other of Europe,”¹⁸ which refers to micro-communities and individuals able to maintain their own story in opposition to the Eurocentric narrative. The “permission to narrate” is not given to those who are on the margins of the official circulation of values and privileges. What is more, those who form the hidden “circuit,” who are the cultural and political “subproletariat” exposed to control and bureaucratic discipline, are rendered vulnerable to “epistemic violence” whose purpose is to shape them as subjects according to dominant and accepted categories. That is why the “subaltern subject” is denied the right to speak for itself.¹⁹ Wertenbaker’s play dramatizes the moment of raising consciousness which her characters gain on the way to composing their own, alternative community. When the protagonists gather together at the end of the play, they are reconciled with their stories and with their new identities. They invite Alexander – a stranger – to “come and walk with us in an English park” (237).

Community of Hope

In Anders Lustgarten’s *Lampedusa*, the European system of values and legal rights is presented as alienating not only towards those who seek asylum within the borders of the Union, but also to those who possess the right to live within them. In this sense, the European precariat, the subaltern class of citizens who live on the margins of their own society, have more in common with those who arrive at the European doorstep than with other, more privileged and affluent members of the continental community. The presence of the refugees forced to wait for the verdict on whether they are to stay or leave the zone of safety in fact exposes the precarious conditions of life lived by those whose existence the asylum seekers can only dream to have. The topic of migration is therefore used to debate the concept of equality practised within the European community. Community and solidarity remain the most fundamental values lying at the foundation of Western democracy, but at the same time they prove to be the most tested ones at the time of migration crisis. *Lampedusa* focuses precisely on the condition of the European

¹⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988) 66.

¹⁸ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 75.

¹⁹ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 76.

community which is unable to face the organizational and moral challenge of both seeing the dead bodies arriving at the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and of dealing with the increasing presence of refugees. It shows European citizens who feel rejected and cheated by the system not only in dealing with the crisis but also in many other areas in which they have been reduced to human non-entities, suppressed by the system which they neither control nor understand.

The plot of *Lampedusa* develops on two separate planes of action which do not overlap or link but still provide a substantial commentary on each other's progress. The strand that Lustgarten gives more attention to concerns the life of coastguards on the island who are forced to deal with administering mass migration from the South. Its protagonist, Stefano, is an ex-fisherman led to abandon his trade due to the decrease in fish supplies. Now, his endurance is tried by the grim sight of dead bodies waiting to be picked up from the sea. Moreover, Stefano's moral and cultural tolerance come under initial strain when he finds himself in need of assistance from a Mali asylum seeker, Modibo, whose services as a mechanic prove indispensable to make the coastguard boat run. Their mutual relation evolves from complete strangeness, cultural and physical, to friendship and full acceptance of difference.²⁰ Rather than cling to a nostalgic attachment to an archaic traditional concept of a perfect community, Stefano and Modibo are forced to think differently, and after some struggle move to form a friendship beyond the constraints of what they inherit as their original identities.

The second strand of action takes place in England where a female character is employed by a debt collecting agency. Her work provides insight both into the dark side of the artificially inflated economy and into the gender and racial tensions simmering beneath the apparently calm surface of British society. Denise also struggles with bureaucratic barriers and inertia to secure financial support to help her sick mother. Instead of being assisted by government institutions, she is bullied and deceived by them. Her only unexpected ally is Caroline, a single mother of mixed Chinese and English background, who comes to her rescue both financially and personally. Denise's experience of precarity mirrors Stefano's, revealing a striking image of the state which withdraws from its basic obligations both towards individual citizens and the universal values of solidarity and compassion.

Consequently, Lustgarten's play shows a growing dissatisfaction with European order, ideals, and prospects, combined with an increasing sense of alienation.

²⁰ On the subject of the body of a migrant stranger as a "sealed phenomenological experience," see Yana Meerzon, "Precarious Bodies in Performance Activism and Theatre of Migration," *Migration and Stereotypes in Performance and Culture*, ed. Yana Meerzon, David Dean, and Daniel McNeil (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) 31.

Counter to that, the play charts a path of integration between the rejected, marginalized characters and the estranged refugees, a bond that highlights the need for empathy, friendship, and mutual recognition of dignity. As in *Credible Witness*, these are the qualities conspicuously absent from the official discourse of the state. Stefano sees no hope in Europe, because its member states have left them “to deal with all this alone.”²¹ In the face of the mounting crisis, the “hospitable people” of Lampedusa “look cruel,” unable to cope with the rescue operation unassisted. Stefano resents the migrants for their “shining, gleaming eyes” (9), indicating their hope for a better life in the country he considers “fucked” (9). Denise displays similar dissatisfaction with her conditions of life and her work in debt collection. Evidently for both Stefano and Denise, their own states of precarity create a layer of indifference to the plights of others. Referring to the rescued migrants Stefano complains: “it’s not part of my job to have to listen to their stories” (13). Similarly, Denise critically assesses the empty consumerism of those from whom she must collect unpaid loans and who violently abuse her for doing so. In this way, Lustgarten’s work indicates lack of deeper social solidarity and bonding between individuals whose lives have been destroyed either by personal degradation or by systemic socioeconomic disadvantage. The Europe these characters experience is distant from the utopian image of a quiet and safe haven which the refugees carry in their minds. Lustgarten exposes the social and economic processes generating a European precariat subject to the forces of big business and global trading which in turn dominate the social and political lives of modern, developed democracies.

What Lustgarten’s protagonists are left with are personal and private relationships struck between individuals across cultural barriers. At some point of their lives, Stefano and Denise both encounter a “stranger” – a person they initially categorised as foreign, suspicious, and unwelcome. Stefano develops a deep friendship with Modibo and discovers joy and hope on the way (32). Denise’s unexpected encounter with Caroline reveals the possibility for kindness in life and offers a chance for her to complete her studies. Clearly, then, the creation of alternative networks based on mutual respect and new prospects for personal and professional success is possible when Lustgarten’s characters tread a personal path away from official protocols, but also away from preconceived senses of their own identities.

The utopian vision of a better world hides in the blind spots of the system, in the substrata of law and order, in the privacy of unchartered relations. The new

²¹ Anders Lustgarten, *Lampedusa* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) 9. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

model of community that Lustgarten outlines is not based on traditionally understood concepts of a “property or a possession.”²² It is not the relation involving having, obtaining, or accumulating.²³ As Esposito observes, the community that forms in contrast to the individualistic and possessive mode of existence is defined by the notion of “debt,” and is akin to a “pledge, a gift that is to be given.”²⁴ Thus members of such a group are “united by ‘obligation,’” and express their intentions by saying “I owe you something” and not “you owe me something.”²⁵ With Lustgarten’s characters the discovery of the debt which one incurs with others marks the beginning of forming a fresh start for the communitarian spirit, giving hope for a better life.

Community of Nostalgia

Credible Witness and *Lampedusa* respectively dramatize the moment of remaking identities and shifting loyalties. External circumstances force the characters to invent new vocabularies to define and communicate their own sense of community. The story of the European continent is thus told from the perspective of characters whose status for various reasons confines them to the subaltern position from which the communal values are interrogated. Both as refugees dreaming of belonging to the European community and as citizens within it, their dissatisfaction with the logic and injustice of that narrative motivates them to change it. What connects plays by Wertenbaker and Lustgarten, devoted almost exclusively to the plight of refugees, with Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* is a tight focus on the condition of contemporary community. As Néstor Canclini observes, “a foreigner is not necessarily someone who comes from elsewhere and speaks another language; it is also someone who does not have access to strategic networks, who does not take part in controlling these networks and therefore depends on the decisions of others.”²⁶ If the characters in *Credible Witness* and in *Lampedusa* ultimately realize how unreliable the European community is in responding to humanitarian crisis, the protagonists in *Jerusalem* experience a similar crisis of community values in their local environment represented by the English village. Butterworth traces the lines of decomposition of contemporary community registered by those inside it.

²² Esposito, *Communitas* 6.

²³ Esposito, *Communitas* 6.

²⁴ Esposito, *Communitas* 6.

²⁵ Esposito, *Communitas* 6.

²⁶ Néstor Canclini, “Migrants: Workers of Metaphors,” *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture. Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*, ed. Mieke Bal and Miguel A. Hernández-Navarro (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011) 29.

However, in contrast to the other plays' positive transformations of community, Butterworth's drama appears to revive what Nancy called the dangerously archaic utopia of tradition in which "the loss of familiarity, fraternity and conviviality" is deplored and mourned.²⁷ The protagonists of *Jerusalem* display a nostalgic craving for a lost England, and this conservative impetus remains the reason for the failure of the community to survive and evolve. Firstly, because the ideal, archaic community is only an idea; secondly, because the practical possibilities of forming such a commune do not exist, as what is left of the past turns out to be only kitsch and cheap imitation of the original. It is significant that Butterworth's play declares the location of its action simply as "England at midnight."²⁸ With the hindsight of Brexit, the play's focus on regional isolation and an authentic lost past in itself highlights the centripetal dynamics of integration/disintegration already discussed. Significantly, the historic identity of the English village depicted by Butterworth is disappearing and can perhaps only be maintained in a frenetic ritual of mimetic revival. The generic setting becomes more precisely named later in the play, when the reader or spectator learns about the Wessex flag flying over a mobile home stranded in a forest. Such a representation of what Aleks Sierz sees as "Deep England" stands not only for the image of the country "rural, pagan and dreamy,"²⁹ but primarily for the idea of the community sharing the same values, practices, and rituals. The curtain which in a conspicuously traditional gesture rises and falls before and after each act carries a "faded cross of St George" (5). The blanched colouring of the national symbol visually represents what Steve Blandford might call "an older idea of Britain" which "needs to be dismantled forever," suggesting that "it is partly the role of artists to produce work that assists in such a process."³⁰

The forest abode inhabited by Johnny "Rooster" Byron, an ex-stuntman, anarchic rebel, and social outcast, exists on the outskirts of civilization bordering a local village and an expanding housing estate. Johnny Byron's charismatic figure attracts a group of troubled youths and adults searching for an alternative to their superficial, commercialized everyday lives. Drugs, loud music, and hypnotic dancing allow them to reconnect with the primal, ancient world symbolized by

²⁷ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 10.

²⁸ Jez Butterworth, *Jerusalem* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009) 6. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

²⁹ Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation. British Theatre Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011) 141. Sierz naturally borrows the concept from writers and theorists who have worked in the field of cultural criticism and rural studies, for instance Raymond Williams or Patrick Wright.

³⁰ Steve Blandford, *Film, Drama, and the Break-Up Britain* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2007) 10.

King Arthur and eulogized by William Blake in what became known as the hymn "Jerusalem," which one of Rooster's visitors sings at the beginning of the play.³¹ At the opposite end of the social spectrum lies the village of Flintock, busy with the preparations for the fair of St George whose holiday Butterworth's play depicts. The clash of these two realities shows precisely the logic of existence of the two communities, their mutual relations, as well as the problems with keeping up their integrity in the face of collapse.

The "unauthorized encampment" (8) according to the Kennet and Avon Council officials, stands for the world on the edge of extinction, for the pure and primal habitus of English tradition and history in which one's identity is defined by land and language. It is frequented by a community of individuals who speak the language of Blake, the Bible, and old poetry, who call England an "enchanted island" (52) or simply "holy land" (72), and who listen to English folk music, spinning yarns of meeting an ancient giant during a visit to Stonehenge. Butterworth deliberately develops this semi-absurd, alcohol infused and drug-addled reality to prove both its oneiric status and its immense psychological and social importance. With the prospect of various revivals of nationalist sentiments which contemporary states have witnessed recently, this enclave of dream and dare, of revulsion and revolt, explains the very basics of the mechanism which offers the dissatisfied citizens a sheltered space for harbouring their anger, solitude, and dissatisfaction. It is at Johnny Byron's trailer home that they can do what is not allowed or legal in the town square, at home, or within marriage, and what is clearly seen as regressive, anti-modern, and obsolete by the progressive mainstream. The forest abode incarnates the repressed subconscious of the culture which has moved on too rapidly to preserve its own tradition or to protect large groups of lost individuals from alienation. They compose the subaltern stratum of the dissatisfied anarchists energized to form and defend an alternative brotherhood.

Butterworth builds the forest community around their common dissatisfaction with the town life. It is particularly the cheap pop-cultural decoration and empty, superficial emotions that offend the tastes of those who visit the forest. Johnny Byron's friends maintain their own legends which they share by using the same language and observing the same rituals. More importantly, they show considerable sensitivity in recognizing the voice and value of every individual who declares to

³¹ David Rabey sees the opening of the play as a direct reference to debates on the importance of the nativist sentiment imaginatively connecting people around the idea of Englishness: "'The Prologue' of *Jerusalem* poses the question: how pertinent or antiquated is the image of England presented by William Blake's hymn." David Ian Rabey, *The Theatre and Films of Jez Butterworth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 109.

support the common creed of ethnic superiority. In this clan of the dissatisfied, Johnny Byron holds the central position with his self-imposed legend of a daredevil stuntman and superhuman male. Despite the unstoppable invasion of the world of commerce, rampant investment, and imitation authenticity, the forest community cherish the ancient legend of “all the lost Gods of England” (18). They exchange stories of magic “ley lines” (72) dividing their territory and proudly emphasize their rebellious status by calling themselves “Outcasts. Leeches. Undesirables.” (50) They have no scruples in voicing contempt for anywhere beyond their immediate locality, to the extent that even other locations in the UK are deemed foreign: “Some Welsh nonsense. Good luck to ‘em. I ain’t never ever fucking been there and I never fucking will.” (60)

It is in this isolated, exclusive, secret, and dogmatic practice of anarchy that Butterworth seems to locate the failure and final disintegration of community, of its toxic existence in the fake shadow of the past. What is most threatening about Butterworth’s vision is the fact that the liminality and transgression of the ritual process, to refer to Victor Turner’s concepts, do not become legitimate in the mainstream life, and by not being recognized as necessary moments of chaos and instability, they run no chance of affirming the “superstructures” of official life.³² For the basic mechanism of structure and antistructure to work, as Turner claims, the culture must maintain communication between the two moments of “fixed” norm and “floating” chaos. In Butterworth’s world, the two realities remain tightly sealed from each other, there being no passage between them: even if selected members of the community venture out beyond the border of the rational into the ritualistic, they do it by stealth, and in a gesture of sinful denial. Consequently, in *Jerusalem* the structure of the quotidian culture and the antistructure of the rebellious liminality exist permanently parallel to each other, with no possibility of redefinition within the set logic of what amounts to the “customary norms.”³³ The interrelation between the two worlds has all symptoms of war, instead of being a dynamic ecology of *communitas*.

No matter how strongly the reader or spectator of Butterworth’s play is persuaded to sympathize with the “lord of misrule”³⁴ and his anarchic mission, the world Johnny Byron stands for slowly slips into oblivion not only in the process of being increasingly dominated by modern commerce and rule of law, but also because it is an imitation of ancient lore, a fading reflection of originary

³² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977) vii.

³³ Turner, *The Ritual Process* 95.

³⁴ Rabey, *The Theatre and Films of Jez Butterworth* 111.

ritual. If we assume after Turner that the study of rituals offers us “understanding of the essential constitution of human societies” and that through rituals people express “what moves them most,”³⁵ then the fragmented performance of the community which the forest visitors engage in is counterfeit. Johnny Byron’s friends not only boost their sense of belonging by large quantities of alcohol and drugs, but primarily live among old, dilapidated, broken, or dysfunctional objects. The forest abode is littered with old TV sets, rusty home appliances, and a variety of junk, which symbolically refers to the older times of glory, power, and heroism. The bacchanalian rituals which take place at this setting testify only to a desperate attempt at reviving what no longer exists. The rebels, therefore, stage a museum piece of pageantry in which dysfunctional remnants of the past are accompanied with chaotic quotes from nativist authors. It is clear that the community of anarchists runs no real chance of reconnecting with the powerful energies of the land, being hopelessly suspended between the devastating superficiality of commerce and tragic emptiness of ethnic patriotism.

The moments spent in the forest, the periods “out of time,”³⁶ carry no rejuvenating value for those who experience them. What is, then, the logic of disintegration of the community that Butterworth presents in his play? For Rabey, the staged forest “misrule” seems to offer the chance to ask the question: “should we, can we, refresh the terms in which we characterize our national identities?”³⁷ However, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the experience of anarchy and rebellion is not a passage to any new feeling or knowledge, nor is it a revival of the community, but rather a static process of conflict between two systems of values confronting each other through mimetic violence. It is a representation of contemporary provincialism, deformed and disfigured by living on a junk heap of the past. It is also a legitimate rejection of the characterless discourse of global commercialization.

In Wertenbaker, Lustgarten, and Butterworth’s dramas protagonists occupy spaces critically affected by instability, devastated by conflict, and exposed to the changeability of social and political currents. In this respect, there is little difference between an immigrant to Europe and an English person living in a Kennet and Avon village (as in Butterworth’s play): all of these characters register a sense of dysfunctionality on the side of the group which they inhabit, they feel emptiness or void, a lack of solid structure which indicates the disintegration of community. Simultaneously, all the protagonists display a need to form bonds, to

³⁵ Turner, *The Ritual Process* 6.

³⁶ Turner, *The Ritual Process* 96.

³⁷ Rabey, *The Theatre and Films of Jez Butterworth* 110.

revive the community, to develop relations even as temporary arrangements based on crisis solidarity and problem-solving assistance. While the plays in question pursue different topics, what unites all of their characters no matter whether they are refugees, stateless Europeans, or postcolonial subjects is the idea that they assume the position of an outsider who experiences alienation or exclusion from society, identity, and tradition. In this sense, they share the condition of “statelessness” which in his monograph devoted to refugee theatre S.E. Wilmer defines as a form of “dispossession” as well as the state of being “excluded from civil society.”³⁸ The precarious position of these dramatic protagonists naturally deprives them of a number of legal, economic, and social privileges; yet, it also enables them to narrate stories which challenge existing community discourse.

In all of the plays discussed here, the community as a project is perceived as flawed and insufficient but at the same time triggering a need to discover alternative scenarios for bonding and cooperation. For characters in Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* who try to revive “deep England” sentiments by reciting Blake and imagining mythic giants, the community of ordinary villagers fail to provide sufficient contact with native, ethnic traditions of the land. By contrast, for the protagonists of Wertenbaker’s and Lustgarten’s dramas, who either belong to the precariat of Europe or are refused the permission to join the European community by migration authorities, the continent offers barriers to a full membership, guarding its integrity in the name of long-standing traditions and customs to which access is granted only for the privileged few. In a sense, Butterworth’s play shows the disappearance of precisely these values and principles which motivate Lustgarten’s and Wertenbaker’s protagonists to undertake their journey to Europe.

Communities of Europe

The European narrative is challenged equally by the tragic fate of Lustgarten’s and Wertenbaker’s protagonists as well as by characters in Butterworth’s play who may not even think about themselves as Europeans but still attempt to form an alternative community based on the traditional model of identity and cultural heritage. Such dramatic images shed light on the challenges faced by common European identity of solidarity, and a sense of shared communicative understanding in societies engaged in political, cultural, and identity debates. With the materialized threat of terrorism, the instability of the financial crisis,

³⁸ S.E. Wilmer, *Performing Statelessness in Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) 97.

forced migration, and the new empowerment of populist radicalism in politics, a variety of definitions used to identify common values or shared languages have been rendered inefficient. The expansion of “ethnolinguistic nationalisms”³⁹ testifies to the social threats of increasing divisions along the thin red lines of territorialized patriotisms.

The image of a small private universe built by a group of stranded individuals remains a powerful alternative to the widespread networks of influence and power. The three plays analysed here show the European continent and its communities in the process of rediscovering core values. Europe has been seen as redefining itself at least since the unification of the East and West following from the rise of Poland’s Solidarity movement and the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The threshold of 1989, marking the dawn of what is often termed as the “post-wall” period in the history of the European project, has also brought about deep changes for the understanding of the continent’s politics. Ivan Krastev points to similarities between the evolution of the Habsburg empire and the recent story of the European Union, stressing parallels in increasingly weak solidarity tendencies and lack of a unified European objective.⁴⁰ Krastev suggests that Europe is undergoing an identity crisis which originates in the depleting legacy of the Enlightenment as a cohesive factor standing behind the very idea of the union (9). Ongoing patterns of migration that reverse the recognized order of colonial conquest in which it used to be the colonizer dominating the dominium, in Krastev’s view, test post-Cold War stability. Krastev also assesses that now, with “outsiders arriving from all directions,” many feel that there is nowhere to go for the “natives” (28). The pressure of double exposure to the eroded identity of the Enlightenment legacy on the one hand, and to the upsurge of migrating peoples on the other, affects the institutional sense of community pledged as borderless equality of individuals by the founding members of the European Community. As a result, what we have observed recently in the public and political discourse are not only arguments dangerously mitigating applications of human rights (35), but also the conviction that the public and private spheres are dominated by not one definition of solidarity but a fierce “clash of solidarities” (43).

As Janelle Reinelt stresses, theatre was quick in indicating the challenges of the new, post-unification reality,⁴¹ which is also testified to by such research projects

³⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities* xiii.

⁴⁰ Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017) 3. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

⁴¹ Janelle G. Reinelt, “Performing Europe: Identity Formation for a ‘New’ Europe,” *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 3 (October 2001): 366. Cf. also Janine Hauthal, “‘Provincializing’ Post-Wall

as “Theatre ReDefined” carried out by Radka Kunderová on the subject of the Czechoslovakian and Former East German theatre in the period following the 1989 political change.⁴² The plays analysed in this article dramatize precisely what Krastev sees as the outcome of the crisis that is a “reassertion of more parochial but culturally deeper identities within individual European countries” (80). The search for the “deeper identities” depicted in contemporary drama of the new millennium marks a new chapter in the political discourse of the theatre. It is a drama which seeks new languages to translate traditional culture into the demands of the present and which actively seeks to build, revive, or sustain communities capable of sharing a vocabulary with which to confront the instability and injustice of ongoing crises. In contrasting ways *Credible Witness*, *Lampedusa*, and *Jerusalem* each voice the need to continuously reinvent senses of collective identity and community and to discover modes of decentring the official jargon of the state or global commerce. Perhaps the playwrights analysed here suggest that the future for the European continent involves – as Krastev has observed – practising private forms of solidarity and staging confrontations between them (43).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso, 2006.
- Blandford, Steve. *Film, Drama, and the Break-Up Britain*. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2007.
- Butterworth, Jez. *Jerusalem*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2009.
- Canclini, Néstor. “Migrants: Workers of Metaphors.” In *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture. Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*. Edited by Mieke Bal and Miguel A. Hernández-Navarro. 23-37. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Esposito, Roberto. *Communitas. The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

Europe: Transcultural Critique of Eurocentric Historicism in *Pentecost, Europe and The Break of Day*,” *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 3, no. 1 (May 2015).

⁴² As the project’s website informs, the research objective is to “explore the relationship between theatre and society” in order to illustrate political and cultural evolutions “in the wake of the 1989 political shifts.” Cf. “Project,” Theatre ReDefined, accessed 31 December 2021, <https://www.theatre-redefined.org/project/index.html>.

- Hauthal, Janine. "'Provincializing' Post-Wall Europe: Transcultural Critique of Eurocentric Historicism in *Pentecost*, *Europe* and *The Break of Day*." *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 3, no. 1 (May 2015): 28-46.
- Jeffers, Alison. *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis. Performing Global Identities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012.
- Krastev, Ivan. *After Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
- Lustgarten, Anders. *Lampedusa*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Meerzon, Yana. "Precarious Bodies in Performance Activism and Theatre of Migration." In *Migration and Stereotypes in Performance and Culture*. Edited by Yana Meerzon, David Dean, and Daniel McNeil. 21-39. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- Milling, Jane. *Modern British Playwriting: The 1980s. Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Edited by Peter Connor. Translated by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis, MN and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Rabey, David Ian. *The Theatre and Films of Jez Butterworth*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Reinelt, Janelle G. "Performing Europe: Identity Formation for a 'New' Europe." *Theatre Journal* 53, no. 3 (October 2001): 365-87.
- Said, Edward. "Reflections on Exile." In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. 137-49. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Sierz, Aleks. *Rewriting the Nation. British Theatre Today*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. 66-111. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Wertenbaker, Timberlake. "Credible Witness." In *Plays* 2. 180-237. London: Faber and Faber, 2014.
- Wilmer, Steve E. *Performing Statelessness in Europe*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.