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Exploring Epic Theatre's Portrayal of Queer Identities and Relations within Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*

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Introduction

Cloud Nine by Caryl Churchill was written for the Joint Stock Theatre Group between 1978-79 after the group took part in a workshop that aimed to interrogate sexual politics. Churchill described in an introduction to the play that those involved in the workshop felt that they had been raised on 'conventional, almost Victorian expectations' concerning gender and sexuality, which led them in adulthood to make 'great changes and discoveries in their lifetimes'.[1] The play's origins are intertwined with the second-wave feminist movement that prevailed in Western society during the sixties and seventies, which aimed to expose how such 'Victorian expectations' harshly enforce patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies that subjugate both women and LGBTQ+ individuals. The impact of both traditional Victorian conventions and second-wave feminisms are presented within the play through how the spectator witnesses how the same family is affected by two distinct moments in time: Act One's setting portrays how the dictations of British imperialism in nineteenth-century colonised Africa impose conventional roles on the family, before jumping a hundred years to the more progressionist backdrop of 1970s London in Act Two, wherein such roles are beginning to be contested.

Cloud Nine's genesis also comes just over a decade after the introduction of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which legalised homosexual acts between men over the age of 21 in Britain on the basis that they were committed consensually *and* in private. As argued by Eve Kofosky Sedgwick, the Act centralised a cultural distinction between the public/private and created a dynamic wherein the 'public' became a space in which the 'naturalness' of heterosexuality could freely interact while the 'private' bounded the concealment of "perverse" queer identities and relations.[2] By aiming to expose how the public/private dynamic homophobically diminishes queerness as a perverse orientation, *Cloud Nine* aspires to call for

[1] Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine,* 1979 (London: Nick Hern Books, 1989), ii.

[2] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Queer and Now', in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader,* eds. Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose (London: Routledge, 2013), 9-10.

the destruction of heteronormative social contexts by presenting how they dictate the lives of the queer characters – namely Ellen, Harry, Edward, Lin and Gerry – within the play.

In recognising that "queer" is a subjective, personal term best defined by the individual who resonates with it, my use of "queer" within this essay follows Fintan Walsh's definition in which queerness encompasses any non-normative mode of being that both undermines 'presumptions of stability' *and* inspires 'alternative ways' of 'doing, feeling and knowing'.[3] While this understanding of "queer" didn't emerge into 'public consciousness' until the 1990s, *Cloud Nine* can be classed as a piece of queer theatre through its aim to destabilise how conventional society centralises heterosexuality as 'the original' and 'natural template' to which all other sexualities become 'derivative'.[4] Churchill not only represents how heteronormative society negatively impacts the queer characters within the play, but she also strives to quite literally "queer" the stage by transgressing from modern dramatic theatre conventions through her adaptation of Epic Theatre techniques.

Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier define the distinction between "coming-out plays" and queer theatre in which, while the former depicts its characters as appearing 'as agents in the world', the latter aims to expose and deconstruct the 'social context' in which those 'agents' are 'rendered'.[5] A prominent way queer theatre can be executed is through the incorporation of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre processes. Brecht was critical of how realism perpetuates hegemonic ideals by 'copying the surface details of the world it offers' and instead he established a theatre that aspires toward the creation of the *verfremdungseffekt.* The *verfremdungseffekt* occurs when the spectator is consistently alienated from the performance at hand so that they are able to 'perceive things' in such a way that the 'social rules governing

[3] Fintan Walsh, *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 2.

[4] David L. Eng with Judith Halberstam and Jose Esteban Munoz, 'Introduction: What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?', *Social Text 84-85*, 23 (2005), 1**;** Stephen Greer, 'Staging difference: queer theory and gender in British performance, 1969-1998' (Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2006), 25.

[5] Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier, *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 17.

our actions' are 'revealed'.[6] Through employing Brecht's Epic Theatre techniques such as cross-casting, *gestus*, *die fabel* and historicisation, all of which generate the V-Effekt, *Cloud Nine* can therefore be defined as a piece of queer theatre through how it encourages the spectator to consciously criticise the oppressive ideological structures of heteronormative society. As a result, Churchill has been renowned by theorists such as David Waterman for powerfully seeking a 'groundlessness of a world freed from the framework of binary opposition'.[7] The following essay will aim to explore how *Cloud Nine's* pursuit of such 'groundlessness' through its incorporation of Epic Theatre techniques affects the portrayal of queer identities and relations across the play, and interrogate how Churchill handles concepts such as compulsory heterosexuality and queer time.

Exposing Compulsory Heterosexuality through Brecht's Cross-Casting and *Gestus*

Judith Butler details that compulsory heterosexuality bases its logic on the requisite that 'if one identifies as a given gender, one must desire a different gender'.[8] Adrienne Rich declares this logic as a 'political institution' which not only labels queerness as deviant from the "naturalness" of heterosexuality, but also fixes masculinity and femininity as polar binaries categorised by oppressive gender stereotypes wherein masculinity is construed as dominating and active, while femininity is submissive and passive.[9] The heterosexual masculine/feminine dynamic therefore becomes the "harmonious" and "normative" ideal. Churchill represents how this 'institution' is upheld through the character of Clive, the family's patriarch who insists on perpetuating conventional ideals crucial to the sustaining of imperial British values, such as

[6] Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn, 'General Introduction', in *Brecht on Theatre*, eds. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn (London: Methuen, 2015), 5.

[7] David Waterman, 'Caryl Churchill's "Cloud Nine": The Fiction of Race and Gender in a System of Power', *Forum Modernes Theater*, 14:1 (1999), 92.

[8] Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer', *GLQ*, 1 (1993), 28.

[9] Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Women: Sex and Sexuality*, 5:4 (1980), 637.

the 'necessity of reproduction' and the family.[10] Through utilising the V-Effekt, characterised by Brecht as making the 'familiar' into 'something peculiar', Churchill aims to deconstruct the familiarity of heterosexuality and conventional gender roles by encouraging the spectator to question how society imposes the 'institution' of compulsory heterosexuality.[11] Churchill does this most powerfully within the play's use of cross-casting, in which Betty, Edward, and Cathy (Lin's daughter in Act Two) are played by actors of the opposite sex.

Cross-casting was a strategy employed by Brecht to 'highlight difference in a bid to offer the audience two perspectives on the material being performed'; that of 'the figure' and that of the 'actor'.[12] Through Betty being played by a man, Churchill 'highlights' to the audience how Betty has internalised what Clive demands of her – she describes in her opening lines that the 'whole aim' of her 'life' is 'to be what he looks for in a wife'.[13] A 'man's creation', represented both literally and figuratively on stage, Churchill emphasises how Betty's identity has become distorted by patriarchal expectations and male-formed ideals of womanhood.[14] The visual effect of a male actor playing a female character also visually "queers" gender representations by spotlighting the performativity of gender directly on stage. Butler's theory of gender performativity argued against the conceptualisation of gender as a 'stable identity' and instead exposed how gender is an 'effect' produced by a 'stylised repetition' of acts in which 'bodily gestures' amalgamate to create the 'illusion' of a 'gendered self'.[15] A male actor playing a female character must therefore rewrite the 'repetition' of their socially-constructed script to incorporate 'stylised' feminine 'gestures'. As described by Janelle Reinelt, while 'the lifting of a Victorian skirt' looks natural 'when a woman does it', such an act becomes 'alienated when

[10] Churchill, 40.

[11] Bertolt Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting that Produces a *Verfremdungseffekt*', in *Brecht on Theatre*, eds. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn (London: Methuen, 2015), 192.

[12] David Barnett, *Brecht in Practice: Theatre, Theory and Performance* (London: Methuen, 2014), 113.

[13] Churchill, 1.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 190.

a man performs it as a learned behaviour'.[16] The presentation of this on stage therefore alienates the familiarity and "naturalness" of heteronormative gender binaries to the spectator by uprooting these so-called "biological" binaries through exposing how they are crafted by culturally-defined codes of what is considered "normative" masculine or feminine behaviour.

The adaptation of such "feminine" behaviour onto the male body also calls for the deconstruction of the male-gaze, a concept explored by Laura Mulvey in which men, in projecting a 'phantasy onto the female figure', diminish women to performing an 'exhibitionist role' in which they must entice 'visual and erotic impact' for male pleasure.[17] Having a male body employ (stereotypically) feminine acts that would usually be commodified for the benefits of male pleasure not only encapsulates how Betty's self-worth has been defined by men, but also exposes the supposed biological "naturalness" of female bodies as 'visual' figures. Churchill doubly demonstrates how patriarchy exploits the female body by enforcing it to adopt feminine acts that perform to male ideals while also exposing how compulsory heterosexuality enforces a dynamic that positions men as the "desirers", women as the "desired". The reversal of Betty's cross-casting as she is played by a woman in Act Two supports this through representing how the second-wave feminist culture of the seventies has enabled Betty to establish an independence away from men; as Betty leaves Clive and decides to 'get a job', she is able to craft her identity away from the male-gaze and as such, her own definition of femininity is "restored".[18] Churchill's portrayal of cross-casting through Betty therefore not only exposes the performativity of gender and the social construction of masculine versus feminine dynamics, but also how compulsory heterosexuality constructs a male-gaze in which women are rendered desired objects for male gratification.

Moreover, theorist Monique Wittig argues that the consequence of ideologies such as the male-gaze establish that the main requisite to qualify as a "woman" is to pursue men,

[16] Janelle Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 89.

[17] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16:3 (1975), 11.

[18] Churchill, 54.

stating that the 'refusal to become heterosexual' always means to 'refuse' to become a 'woman'.[19] She determines that lesbians within patriarchal society, due to their 'refusal' of the 'economic' and 'political power of men', are rendered as being in between 'a not-woman' and 'a not-man'.[20] Churchill's use of cross-casting arguably portrays Wittig's argument through the presentation of lesbian relations between Betty and Ellen. In Act One, Scene Two, in a re-enactment of Betty's desires for Harry in which she describes how she wants him to 'stroke her hair' and 'kiss' her, Ellen responds, 'Like this, Betty?', before the stage directions describe that '*Ellen kisses'* her.[21] It could be argued that Churchill represents Wittig's concept of the lesbian 'not-woman' here through using the Brechtian 'not/but', a technique Brecht described as whatever the character/actor 'does not do', must be 'conserved in what he does'.[22] While *Cloud Nine*'s play-text describes a lesbian kiss, the spectator witnesses a physically heterosexual one between the female-casted Ellen and cross-casted "male" Betty; a representation of the Brechtian 'not/but' through the depiction of a not-quite heterosexual, yet not-quite sapphic interaction. It could be argued from this that Betty's cross-casting therefore aims to criticise how patriarchy renders lesbianism as incompatible with womanhood. However, Churchill's use of cross-casting only diminishes Ellen and Betty's sapphic affections. James Harding argues that Betty's cross-casting 'refigures' the 'transgressive' lesbian kiss between Ellen and Betty 'as a conventional reaffirmation of heterosexuality'.[23] The visually heterosexual kiss instead of a sapphic one only represents how, instead of utilising the transformative power of representing lesbian relations physically on stage, Churchill fails to deconstruct, and only reinforces, heteronormativity by comfortably coaxing the spectator into

[19] Monique Wittig, 'One Is Not Born a Woman', in *Feminist Local and Global Theory Perspectives Reader*, eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim, 3rd edn (New York: Routledge, 2013), 248.

[20] Ibid, 247.

[21] Churchill, 26.

[22] Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting that Produces a *Verfremdungseffekt*', 184.

[23] James M. Harding, 'Cloud Cover: (Re) Dressing Desire and Comfortable Subversions in Caryl Churchill's Cloud Nine', *PMLA,* 133:2 (1998), 261.

considering the existence of lesbian desire through the visual 'reaffirmation of heterosexuality'. This 'reaffirmation' also amplifies the issue of "lesbian erasure". As a consequence for being a 'direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women', Rich explains how sapphic relations are both dismissed and/or rendered invisible by patriarchal society.[24] While Churchill acknowledges the difference in societal attitudes between male and female heterosexuality, stating in her introduction to the play that while 'Harry's homosexuality is reviled, Ellen's is invisible', she only further perpetuates society's refusal to acknowledge the existence of lesbian desire through how Betty's cross-casting disallows the opportunity of solid sapphic representation.[25] Consequently, while Churchill may intend to expose how patriarchal paradigms render lesbianism as incompatible with womanhood through the employment of the Brechtian 'not-but', her use of cross-casting for Betty only preserves heteronormativity by adding to the dismissal of women-loving-women relationships by brutally denying any physical acknowledgement of their existence to appear on stage.

Harding further interrogates how Churchill's use of cross-casting may harmfully impact the portrayal of queer identities through the cross-casting of Edward in Act One, where young Edward is played by a woman. He argues that Edward's cross-casting reinforces the 'dominance of heterosexual discourse' by coinciding with the stereotype surrounding male homosexuality as synonymous with effeminacy – Edward is played by a woman purely 'because he is homosexual'.[26] Edward's female cross-casting therefore may fail at producing Brecht's V-Effekt as it only reinstates, rather than alienates, the familiar to the spectator as it perpetuates the stereotypical link between homosexuality and effeminacy. However, Churchill portrays that Edward's effeminacy is more than a "stereotype" – it is something powerfully innate within him. This is shown through Churchill's employment of Brecht's *gestus*, a

[24] Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', 649.

[25] Churchill, ii.

[26] Harding, 'Cloud Cover: (Re) Dressing Desire', 265.

technique Brecht defined as the 'mimetic and gestural expression' of social relations.[27] *Gestus*, as described by Sabine Hake, is a significant gesture that aims to make social relations 'visible' and 'communicable' to the audience, and this is shown through Edward's interactions with Victoria's doll throughout the first Act.[28] Within Act One, Scene Three, Edward is described to be '*playing clap hands'* with '*the doll',* which leads him to be physically scolded by Betty as 'dolls are for girls.'[29] Through the 'visible' gesture of Edward '*playing*' with his younger sister's doll, Churchill makes social relations 'communicable' to the spectator by questioning the supposed "unnaturalness" of a little boy playing with a doll. Instead, she encourages them to consider the ways in which traditional gender norms, rather than them "naturally" occurring within society, are actually socially-constructed and enforced onto us from birth, so much so that even children's toys have become coded with gendered scripts. Edward's cross-casting, of course, only heightens this further through how the visual depiction of a woman, not a little boy, '*playing*' with a doll on stage, makes the *gestus* appear "normative" and acceptable. Both the use of cross-casting and *gestus* combine here, therefore, to represent Churchill's call for the deconstruction of what society constitutes as "proper" gendered behaviour. Later on in the scene, once everyone else has left the stage, Edward is described to *'sneak back*' to retrieve the doll and he '*picks it up and comforts it'*.[30] The use of *gestus* here in accentuating to the spectator Edward's private comforting of the doll emphasises that not only is Edward resistant toward the expectations that are being enforced on him, but his inclination toward the toy is anything but performative. Churchill depicts Edward with a natural affiliation towards nurturing that defies Harding's argument that his effeminacy is a perpetuation of stereotype – regardless of his sexuality, it is something instinctive within him. Consequently, Churchill's use of *gestus*, in emphasising both Edward's *'playing'* and comforting of his sister's doll, conveys social

[27] Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting that Produces a *Verfremdungseffekt*', 187.

[28] Sabine Hake, 'Gestus in Context', in *Bertolt Brecht in Context,* ed. by Stephen Brockmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 161.

[29] Churchill, 30.

[30] Ibid, 34.

relations through defying heteronormativity's gender roles and its associations of queerness as something perverse by asserting it as natural and innate.

This *gestus* is mirrored within Act Two of the play through how Cathy, Lin's young daughter, who is also cross-casted and played by a grown man, too plays with an object that contradicts gender expectations. In the Act's first scene, Cathy is described in the stage directions to come '*in with a gun*' and '*shoot*' the children she is playing with, and she is later depicted in the Act to be '*wearing a pink dress and carrying a rifle'.*[31] The *gestus* of a little girl playing with a '*gun*' or '*carrying a rifle*' works in a similar way to Edward's affiliation with his sister's doll by encouraging the spectator to question stereotypical gender roles, except Churchill is now also satirically destroying society's stereotypical vision of the "good girl", in which young girls are considered to be gentle and well-behaved. Depicting a little girl on stage to be boldly playing with a violent weapon – she exclaims in the first scene '*kiou, kiou, kiou*' as she pretends to shoot the other children – obliterates the patriarchal "good girl" dynamic that culturally raises young girls to grow into a womanhood subjugated by subservient propriety. This use of violent *gestus* combined with Cathy's cross-casting as an adult man also removes the possibility of children's innocence to be depicted on the stage. Lee Edelman's theory of reproductive futurism explores how traditional conservatism uses the innocent 'figure of the child' to motivate society to consistently look toward a 'political futurity'.[32] For the sake of the next generation, we must stabilise this 'futurity' through maintaining conventional ideologies by following heteronormative timelines of marriage and procreation. This innocent 'figure of the child' not only further excludes queerness from "normative" society (as queers cannot "naturally" procreate) but also subjugates queer lives as perverse subjects that threaten the purity of such innocence. Churchill's visual depiction of an adult male, rather than a young girl, '*wearing a pink dress and carrying a rifle'* therefore destroys the possibility of

[31] Churchill, 50.

[32] Lee Edelman, 'The Future is Kid Stuff': Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive', in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, eds. by Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose (London: Routledge, 2013), 288.

conservative society's innocent 'figure of the child' to appear on stage – the pretty '*pink dress*' emblematic of "good girl" innocence becomes futile on the figure of an adult man who, in '*carrying a rifle*', symbolically 'shoots' down heteronormativity's oppressive gender norms. Not only is the spectator alienated by Cathy's cross-casting, but Churchill also orientates them to focus on the present issues at hand instead of perpetuating the exclusionary ideologies of reproductive futurism that encourage us to be incessantly looking toward the future. Consequently, through the combined use of *gestus* and cross-casting in the representation of adult-male Cathy playing with a gun, Churchill powerfully insists that the tyrannous conservative future 'stops here' by powerfully condemning how conservatism exploits children's innocence for their queerphobic political gain.[33]

Exploring Queer Time and Queer Identities using Brecht's *Die Fabel* and Historicisation

Churchill's rejection of heteronormative society's reproductive futurism is further portrayed through *Cloud Nine*'s disruption of linear time narratives. While a century lies between the conservative setting of nineteenth-century colonial Africa of Act One and the more liberal 1970s London backdrop of Act Two, the characters themselves have only aged 25 years. Churchill's rupture of linear time here is representative of Brecht's *die fabel,* in which Brecht argued that the plot of Epic Theatre should be distinct from conventional realist theatre's 'straightforward linear flow' and instead should be restructured so that the narrative appears 'knotted' rather than 'seamless', 'visible' rather than 'invisible'.[34] This technique draws a connection with the concept of queer time, which explores how our own lives are socially expected to follow a linear narrative marked by heteronormative life events, such as marriage and child-rearing. Queer theorists E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen argue how queer lives have 'always been marked' by their 'untimely relation' to these 'temporal phases', and are

[33] Ibid, 297.

[34] Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn, 'Return to Germany', in eds. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn, *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 2015), 263; Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre,* 9.

consequently further Othered in consequence of being unable to adhere to heteronormative temporalities.[35] Churchill's employment of Brecht's *die fabel* suggests a rejection of conservative society's endorsement of these 'temporal phases' and she instead encourages Jack Halberstam's vision of how queerness has the ability to produce 'alternative temporalities' that 'lie outside' these repressive 'paradigmatic markers of life experience'.[36]

Churchill distinguishes between the first and second Act by describing the former as 'firmly structured' to reflect its conservative setting, while the latter has a 'looser structure' to mirror its 'less authoritarian feeling'.[37] Before spectators arrive at this 'less authoritarian feeling' in Act Two, Churchill confirms the first Act's firmer structure and reflects its farcical nature through Harry and Ellen's wedding. Churchill places their wedding in the middle of the play, rather than following dramatic convention where weddings are often positioned at the climax of a dramatic comedy to foreground, as Elaine Aston notes, 'the restoration of family values'.[38] In so doing, Churchill not only ruptures linear conventions, but also the 'restoration' of these traditional values as they become overthrown by the more autonomous Act Two that immediately follows the wedding. Churchill represents through Harry and Ellen's wedding how non-normative sexualities, as a consequence of contradicting the socially-accepted scripts of heterocentric time, are forced through institutions such as marriage to assimilate to what Michael Cobb refers to as the 'sentimental terrain' of the 'family', a 'terrain' that allows for the perpetuation of conventional norms and values that invalidate queer lives as perverse.[39] In the opening stage directions of the Act's final scene, Churchill details a '*table'* with a bridal *'white cloth'* and '*a wedding cake*'.[40] These traditional wedding rituals emphasise the scene's focus

[35] E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* (New York: State University Press, 2011), 6.

[36] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 14.

[37] Churchill, ii.

[38] Elaine Aston, *Caryl Churchill* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1997), 32.

[39] Michael Cobb, 'Uncivil Wrongs: Race, Religion, Hate and Incest', *Social Text 84-85,* 23 (2005), 252.

[40] Churchill, 44.

on the oppressive glorification of such rituals, particularly through how the union of Harry and Ellen aims to purify their queer identities by forcing them into the roles of husband and wife that will sustain the 'shining domestic bliss' of the heteronormative way of life.[41]

Churchill also exposes the brutality of such institutions' attempt to eradicate queerness through the scene's negation of Harry and Ellen's emotions. Harry and Ellen themselves do not outwardly express their grief toward the wedding; it is Maud who tells Ellen not to cry ('Ellen, you don't cry at your own wedding, only other people's'), and Clive who exposes Harry's discomfort by instructing him to 'put his arm around' Ellen and 'have a kiss'.[42] Maud and Clive's precedence here over Harry and Ellen demonstrates how heteronormativity, as defined by Sara Ahmed, can function 'as a form of public comfort'.[43] Ahmed explores how, while heterosexual bodies are able to 'extend into spaces that have already taken their shape', queer bodies are either left segregated from, or forced to uncomfortably conform to, such 'spaces'.[44] The invalidation of Harry and Ellen's feelings at the hands of Maud and Clive, heterosexual characters who are "comfortable" in a space that takes 'their shape', shows how heteronormativity sacrifices queer feelings for the sake of restoring traditional social order. Through this, Churchill demonstrates how instead of maintaining heteronormativity as a 'form of comforting' and forcing queer lives to take its 'shape', we should aim to deconstruct its modes of oppression. Churchill's employment of Brecht's *die fabel* therefore, demonstrated through the wedding of Harry and Ellen occurring within the middle of the play, destabilises heteronormativity as a "comfortable" paradigm. By calling for the destruction of heteronormativity's tyrannical institutions, Churchill sets the stage for the (arguably) utopian

[41] Ibid, 46.

[42] Ibid, 46-7.

[43] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 157.

[44] Ibid.

vision of Act Two to occur by encouraging what Halberstam refers to as the 'potentiality' of queerness to conceptualise lives 'unscripted by conventions of family'.[45]

Act Two has been pronounced as a utopian vision by scholars such as Reinelt through how its content and form matches the 'zeitgeist of the time', contrasting Act One's rigid setting through its depiction of the 'tumultuous project of sexual experiment'.[46] Queer characters Edward, Gerry, Victoria and Lin, arguably have greater freedom to explore their identities in a more progressive society in which boundaries of gender and sexuality are more flexible in contrast to the Act that came before them. One way Churchill represents this contrast is through Brecht's technique of historicisation, in which Brecht was interested in the way that 'human behaviour' can be depicted as 'alterable' through people's dependency on 'political and economic factors'.[47] Through historicisation, Brecht argues that the spectator will be able to criticise a character's 'behaviour' from a 'social point of view' by showcasing how the character's position in a specific place and time is the main determiner of their actions.[48] As a result, the audience is encouraged to reflect on how we are influenced not only by the past, but our current place in history.

This is shown within *Cloud Nine* through the interaction between Betty and Lin within Act Two, Scene Two, where Churchill represents how the characters' polar differences are a direct result of the societal factors of which they are accustomed. Betty asks Lin if she is 'lonely' without a 'husband', describing that she, now having left Clive, finds it 'strange not having a man in the house' as she doesn't 'know who to do things for'.[49] Lin affirms that she has enough friends of her own, asserting that the only person anyone should 'do things for' is themselves.[50]

[45] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place,* 14.

[46] Janelle Reinelt, 'On Feminist and Sexual Politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27.

[47] Bertolt Brecht, 'On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre,* eds. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn (London: Methuen, 2015), 126.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Churchill, 64.

[50] Ibid.

The dynamic between Lin, who openly identifies as a lesbian, contrasts how Betty's identity is dependent on her value as a 'mother, daughter, and wife'.[51] Through this Churchill affirms how both women have been affected by the societies that have shaped them – while Lin benefits from a second-wave feminist culture that aimed to liberate women's identities away from men, Churchill distances the audience to represent not only how the conditions of Act One continue to shape Betty individually, but also signify how the rigid patriarchal structures of supposedly "past" Victorian ideology still permeate 1970s Britain. Betty states that she doesn't 'like women very much', never mind the fact that she, as Lin points out, is a 'woman' herself.[52] Not only through this is the spectator reminiscent of Betty's cross-casting in Act One and her internalised need for male validation, but the progression of societal attitudes between the Acts is highlighted through the use of Brecht's *haltung*. Through *haltung,* Brecht encourages characters to adopt 'socially critical' attitudes that enable discussion of 'social conditions'.[53] Churchill employs this through placing Betty's misogynistic attitude, her *haltung,* in direct contrast to the *haltung* of the more independent Lin to expose how the 'social conditions' of 1970s Britain are still permeated by patriarchal Victorian ideologies. Therefore, through historicisation and *haltung*, Churchill calls for the destruction of such ideologies by portraying them as anachronistic in a culture that is in the process of rapid change.

Moreover, Reinelt claims that the audience, having been 'conditioned by the first Act to look critically' at the social contexts of 'the past', are now encouraged to 'examine matters close to home'.[54] This is shown in this scene through the historicisation of Lin's worldview. Lin's open identity as a lesbian who has removed the influence of men in her life opposes the invisibility of lesbianism that was prevalent within the first Act, and instead, Churchill arguably proposes what Annamarie Jagose refers to as 'the productive possibilities of lesbian

[51] Ibid, 23.

[52] Ibid, 64.

[53] Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting that Produces a Verfremdungseffekt', 184.

[54] Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre,* 87.

derivation'.[55] Lesbian derivation is the concept in which lesbian-feminists regard lesbianism as 'the most complete form of feminism' through its disconnection from male influence.[56] As a result, lesbianism is declared as a political movement most powerfully influential in the achievement of second-wave feminist aims that call for the legal, economic and social rights of women. In so doing, Churchill may be using historicisation to show how Betty's archaic misogyny, and therefore Victorian society's patriarchal modes, may be best deconstructed through lesbian derivation.

However, Churchill also presents the problematic impacts that can occur from politicising lesbianism as a movement. While the worldview of Act Two, displayed through Lin's independent outlook, appears progressive in contrast to Betty's (and Act One's) misogyny, the idea that the Act can be classed as a 'utopian possibility' is denounced by Jane Thomas's argument that as Act Two unfolds, it represents not a visionary 'search for identity', but the 'struggle *against* identity'.[57] Lin's 'search' to craft an identity away from patriarchal domination becomes a 'struggle' and Churchill portrays how the politicisation of lesbianism in a culture that aims to destabilise identity boundaries is paradoxical. While the second-wave feminist movement aspires toward social freedom, it removes lesbianism as an identity defined by romantic and/or sexual attraction and instead confines it to a set of political criteria that one must meet in order to be valid. Churchill shows how Lin struggles to fulfil this criteria when Lin claims that she's 'sick of dressing like a boy' instead of looking 'sexy', and while she tries to subvert gender norms by dressing Cathy in 'jeans', her daughter wishes to 'wear dresses'.[58] Lesbian-feminists such as Sande Zeig demand that lesbians must fight against oppression by rejecting 'gestures assigned to the class of women' as they are the 'gestures of slaves', an

[55] Annamarie Jagose, 'THEORIZING QUEER TEMPORALITIES: A Roundtable Discussion', *GLQ*, 13 (2007), 179.

[56] Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 136.

[57] Aston, *Caryl Churchill,* 1; Jane Thomas, 'The Plays of Caryl Churchill: Essays in Refusal', in *The Death of the Playwright*, ed. by Adrian Page (London: Macmillan Press, 1992), 175.

[58] Churchill, 66.

ideology Lin has attempted to incorporate by encouraging stereotypically masculine dress not only on herself, but on her daughter as well.[59] Churchill presents here that consistently rejecting patriarchal conformities such as feminine dress not only stigmatises femininity as a form of "slavery" subordinate to masculinity, but it also leaves lesbians such as Lin in a state of contradiction, stuck between political goals and their own sense of identity. Churchill employs Brecht's historicisation here to show how 1970s Britain's second-wave feminist vision has problematically contorted lesbianism as a political statement and as a result, the spectator is encouraged to see the present at 'a distance similar to the way the "past" is seen'.[60] Churchill consequently denounces 1970s Britain as a faultless utopia striving for political change and instead, just like Victorian colonised Africa, presents it as a historical moment in time that needs to be contested.

Churchill further calls for 1970s Britain to be contested through historicisation to depict how, while these queer characters exist in a society that has technically legalised homosexuality, homophobia continues to harmfully dictate their lives. The 1967 Sexual Offences Act's legalisation of only *private* homosexual relations has been criticised by Alan Sinfield for its reinforcement of homophobic doctrines by forcing queer people into lives of secrecy by perpetuating the 'unspeakability of homosexuality'.[61] Within *Cloud Nine,* Churchill presents the 'unspeakability of homosexuality' as a direct cause of the Victorian homophobic ideologies of the first Act by using historicisation to affirm that 'it is a particular kind of ahistorical smugness to think we have transcended' these ideologies.[62] This is shown through the mirroring of the characters Harry from Act One and Gerry from Act Two. Both Harry and Gerry are shown to experience their queer identities in ways that reflect and expose to the

[59] Sande Zeig, 'The Actor as Activator: Deconstructing gender through gesture', *Women & Performance*, 2 (1985), 13.

[60] Reinelt, *After Brecht,* 87.

[61] Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), 26.

[62] Reinelt, *After Brecht,* 89.

spectator the respective historical and social conditions of each character. Harry's homosexuality in Victorian colonised Africa is reviled as a 'disease more contagious than diphtheria' that leaves Clive feeling 'contaminated' when Harry '*takes hold*' of him.[63] Here, Churchill presents how Clive's homophobia is dictated by his society's ideology of homosexuality as a 'threat' not only of the 'figurative body of the Empire', but the 'wholeness' of the 'privileged male body', as explored by Stephen Greer.[64] Harry's homosexuality is reduced by his historical context as an act of perversion that violates the conservative social order upheld by patriarchs such as Clive, by posing a 'threat' toward not only traditional norms and values but how it also threatens to effeminate masculinity as a penetrable subject. This ideology permeates into Act Two within Gerry's monologue, where he describes a secret and purely sexual encounter with a man in a private compartment of a train during a 'six-minute journey'.[65] Gerry rejects his sexual partner's romantic interest in getting to know him by stating that the sex is 'better if nothing is said'.[66] As Gerry's homosexuality here isn't outwardly reviled in comparison to Harry's, it could be argued that Churchill represents a positive cultural shift in attitudes. However, Gerry's rejection of romance shows how the 1967 Sexual Offences Act's privatisation of homosexuality only further hindered queer people's ability to experience romantic relations that can safely exist within the public sphere. Aston and Elin Diamond claim that *Cloud Nine* emphasises that 'if the past is never settled', such as the perversion of Harry's homosexuality in Act One, 'the present becomes temporally unstable'.[67] Churchill, therefore, uses historicisation to depict how Gerry's 'temporally unstable' present, shaped by the enforced privatisation of his sexuality, is a continuation of the revilement of homosexuality encouraged by Victorian heteronormative doctrine. The transient presentation of past socio-

[63] Churchill, 41.

[64] Stephen Greer, 'Staging difference', 150.

[65] Churchill, 59.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond, 'Introduction: on Caryl Churchill', in *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill,* eds. Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.

historical conditions that Brecht encourages in order to make 'our own age' also be 'construed as transient' is reflected through Churchill's affirmation that the homophobic denigration of queer lives is not something that just belongs in the Victorian past – rather, it is as prominent as ever before.[68]

Conclusion: The Effectiveness of Brecht's Techniques in the Portrayal of Queer Identities

Churchill's use of Brecht's Epic Theatre techniques within *Cloud Nine*, namely cross-casting, *gestus, die fabel* and historicisation, aspires to produce the V-Effekt in order to alienate and unsettle the spectator from the familiarity of the patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks that continue to operate within society. Through cross-casting and *gestus*, Churchill interrogates the dynamics of compulsory heterosexuality by staging the performativity of society's polarised definitions of gender and how the construction of heteronormative paradigms aim to suppress the survival of queer lives. The incorporation of *die fabel* reflects the concepts of queer time and calls for the deconstruction of how heteronormativity enforces us to follow strict timelines of marriage and family of which queers struggle (or are forced) to conform with, while her use of historicisation by contrasting the imperialist setting of Act One's colonial Africa with the supposedly more progressive environment of 1970s London intended to emphasise how the homophobic norms of conventional Victorian society still infiltrate attitudes toward queerness in the modern day. Through employing the conventions of Brecht's dialectical theatre, therefore, it can be argued that Churchill aims to inspire the spectator to strive toward Waterman's 'groundlessness' world 'freed from the framework of binary opposition' by encouraging them to question how we may strive not only toward achieving equality, but transcending it.[69]

[68] Bertolt Brecht, 'Short Organon for the Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre*, eds. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn (London: Methuen, 2015), 240.

[69] Waterman, 'Caryl Churchill's "Cloud Nine": The Fiction of Race and Gender in a System of Power', 92.

However, it is important to interrogate how the pursuit of this 'groundlessness' may perpetuate problematic perceptions of what it means to be queer. In her essay 'Critically Queer', Butler notes the drawbacks of the use of "queer" as an identity category, arguing that the term must be 'subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations' of its 'own production'.[70] Butler indicates how, while queer theory's reclaiming of "queer" from a derogatory term into a metonym for 'contradiction' and 'contention' aims to empower the diversity of non-normative sexualities, such reclaiming is flawed through how it unintentionally serves to reinstate that there is a "norm" to be contradictory to and thus, to be "queer" from.[71] Determining "queer" as synonymous with fluidity paradoxically encourages a restrictive requisite in which not only does it maintain heterosexuality as the dominant category, but it also establishes that those with non-normative sexualities must exist within their separate sphere of constant 'contradiction' and 'contention' in which queerness and heterosexuality cannot, and must not, coalesce.

The establishment of a "queer theatre", therefore, works in the same exclusionary way. Queer theatre's aberration of realist theatre problematically asserts that the most empowering way to present non-normative identities on stage is through avant-garde, transgressive forms of theatre, an assertion that further perpetuates queerness as a site that must incessantly strive toward contesting the "norm". The incorporation of Brecht's experimental Epic Theatre conventions in *Cloud Nine,* therefore, problematically binds its queer characters to an unfixed, disorientating theatre that, while it aims to inspire change by exposing the dynamics of oppressive paradigms, becomes unable to offer them a society in which they can comfortably orientate themselves not as perverse, unstable subjects, but as valid human beings. Her queer characters are reduced to empty symbols for the paradigms they are trying to contest, rather

[70] Butler, 'Critically Queer', 19.

[71] Jill Dolan, 'Building a Theatrical Vernacular: Responsibility, Community, Ambivalence and Queer Theatre', in *The Queerest Art,* eds. Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla (New York: New York University, 2002), 5.

than being material entities whose queerness, while an integral, enriching part of their lives, does not wholly define them.

Through Brecht's techniques, Churchill optimistically stages the pursuit of a society in which we can be freed from the binaries of gender and sexuality and heteronormative doctrines such as marriage and reproduction. This pursuit is further evident in the second Act when Edward labels himself as a 'lesbian'; when he, Victoria, Martin and Lin engage in ritualistic 'orgy'; and when he, Victoria and Lin defy the conventional nuclear family by living together, sleeping in the same bed and raising Cathy and Victoria's son Tommy together – all of which aspires to completely dissolve the restricting definitions of identity categories and the heteronormative scripts that craft limiting ideologies of the family.[72] While such a society may be seen as utopian to some, it is naive in its pretension that this society will provide a safe space for all. Not only does it negate those who find comfort and/or pride in identity categories or those who assimilate to marriage and/or family as "not queer enough", but it assumes that existing on the fringes away from normativity will be a revitalising and empowering experience. As argued by Tim Dean, assimilating queerness as radically distinct from normative society survives on the rhetoric that exclusion from 'all social ties' will result in 'alternate forms of community'. Such rhetoric ignores how this 'community' isn't guaranteed and as a result, this exclusion not only further Others queer identities, but also poses a risk of isolation.[73]

Consequently, as argued by Walsh, queer theatre should not only aim to be an 'agent of agitation and upheaval', but it must also operate as a 'homing device' in which 'forms of belonging' can be 'forged'.[74] While Churchill's combined use of Brecht's Epic Theatre techniques such as cross-casting, *gestus, die fabel* and historicisation work well to expose how the frameworks of patriarchal and heteronormative society subjugate queer lives, her

[72] Churchill, 72; 75.

[73] Tim Dean, 'Lacan Meets Queer Theory', in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader,* eds. Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose (London: Routledge, 2013), 156.

[74] Walsh, *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland,* 20.

utilisation of Brecht's alienating theatre creates a rootless world that struggles to provide her queer characters with something to hold onto, while further perpetuating problematic definitions of queerness as contestatory. In so doing, Churchill determines that *Cloud Nine* is not a place in which queer identities can call home. Perhaps it isn't trying to be — but if we are to empower queerness and invigorate hope for a future in which queer lives can do more than survive but comfortably, loudly and *publicly* exist, we must envision for them a world in which they can safely belong.

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