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Article

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*'killing joy as a world making project'*¹: Anger in the work of debbie tucker green

Since her debut in 2003 with *born bad* and *dirty butterfly*, the black British playwright debbie tucker green has been a consistently experimental and angry voice on the English stage. Characterized by heightened demotic poetry and a refusal of the certainties of social realism, her work has been determinedly woman-centred, provocative, political and angry. This essay, which focuses primarily on tucker green's short play *hang* (2015), is concerned with her uses of anger. Its title is drawn from Sara Ahmed's blog *feministkilljoys*. Over a number of years Ahmed has argued that in contemporary culture, happiness – which she takes to mean feelings of pleasure and contentment – is implicitly linked to particular kinds of life choices: heterosexuality, marriage, having children, and so on. Working at the intersection between queer, feminist and critical race theories, Ahmed shows that such happiness comes at a cost because it is fragile and restrictive, and importantly, because it conceals the unhappiness it produces. She identifies the figure of the feminist killjoy as one who 'brings other[s] down, not only by talking about unhappy topics such as sexism but by exposing how happiness is sustained by erasing the signs of not getting along'.² The feminist killjoy kills other people's joy for good reason: to remind them that unhappiness is a necessary bi-product of culturally prescribed visions of happiness. In this essay I suggest that debbie tucker green makes a striking and meaningful contribution to this discourse, by staging black women who kill joy by articulating their resistance via angry resolve, belligerence and intransigence.

Key Words: anger, poetry, racism, sexism, victim

Like much of her earlier work, debbie tucker green's *hang* (2015), concerns itself with the aftermath of traumatic events from a predominantly female perspective. The plot of this short and intense play, which opened on the main stage at the Royal Court in June 2015, is relatively straightforward. At some point in the future, described in the published text only as '*nearly now*', a black woman, who has been the victim of an unspecified but appalling crime is summoned to a government facility, a dark windowless space lit only by long tubes of fluorescent light.³ There she is met by two officials whose job it is to help her decide how the person who has damaged her family will be punished, or more specifically how he will be

¹ Sara Ahmed, *feministkilljoys* (2016) <https://feministkilljoys.com/> [Accessed 14 September 2016].

² Sara Ahmed, 'Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness'. *Signs* 35 (2010), 571–594, p. 582.

³ debbie tucker green, *hang* (Nick Hern Books: London, 2015), p.2.

executed. The play's characters are never named, and are distinguished in the text only by the titles One and Two for the officials, and Three for the victim. In the original production, directed by tucker green herself, the role of One was taken by a white woman and that of Two by an Asian man, but the published text indicates they can be of 'any race' and that Two can be either 'male or female'.⁴ By contrast, character Three is identified as 'female' and 'Black'.⁵ All three characters are English but by placing a black woman at its centre, *hang*, evokes the Stephen Lawrence case and provokes a consideration of the negative effects of the criminal justice system on the individuals and marginalized constituencies that are obliged to live under its supposedly impartial authority.

Although anxious – we are told that she has a 'slight nervous tremble in her hand(s)' – Three is nonetheless eloquent, determined and full of cold rage.⁶ She responds to a steady stream of official platitudes with powerful accounts of the crime's shattering consequences for her family. Her children, she reports, 'can't settle in a school ... can't settle in a class ... can't settle in in the house, in a house, in our house, they are *un*-settled, *still* unsettled, have been unsettled – unsettle-able, *un*-settling'.⁷ She describes the devastating impact of witnessing the un-named crime on her nine-year old 'open-faced, open-minded, open-hearted little boy'.⁸ She and her husband, she reveals, 'have stopped fucking ever since'.⁹ Finally, after doggedly insisting on a detailed explication of the effects of each available method of execution – lethal injection, gas, firing squad, beheading, hanging – Three announces she wants the perpetrator hanged. 'That was my decision when I walked into the room. And that is my decision now', she states.¹⁰ The play ends as Three opens a letter delivered by the officials but written by her attacker. A photo falls from the envelope and she is forced to confront the perpetrator's 'fucking blue, blue eyes' one more time.¹¹ Her hands are trembling. Here as elsewhere, tucker green's critical method is inductive and experiential. Her starting point is intense female experience and the implications of that experience are not so much straightforwardly rationalized as felt.

By adhering to unities of time, place and action, *hang* seems to rely more heavily on the conventions of social realism than tucker green's earlier work, which has been celebrated

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p.24.

⁸ Ibid., p.23.

⁹ Ibid., p.35.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

¹¹ Ibid., p.70.

for its rejection of realism and its formal inventiveness. In *stoning mary* (2005), for instance, she uses an all white cast to tell three inter-related stories about problems specific to sub-Saharan Africa – the AIDS epidemic; child soldiers; the stoning of women – and in so doing troubles the normative assumptions that blunt our engagement with the suffering of others typically figured as over ‘there’. In *random* (2008), a single black female actor – Nadine Marshall in Sacha Wares’ original Royal Court production – plays all four members of a black family that in the course of one ordinary day loses its teenage son to random knife attack. Shifting between roles and vocal registers and performing on an empty stage, the actor paints a moving picture of the pain caused by such an event. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the surface realism of *hang* is deceptive. For one thing we never learn the precise nature of the crime committed against the black family and are consequently deprived of the knowledge we would need to judge whether the punishment is fitting. In addition, unlike most realist texts, the play does not re-inscribe inequality, or the status quo, by pretending to be an objective record of the real world. Instead tucker green creates an alternative fictional future-world, a speculative dystopia, that, by refusing to take our shared assumptions about victimhood, appropriate punishment and justice for granted, explicitly performs an estranging critical interrogation of those assumptions. The critical and emotional insights offered by tucker green’s play-world are made possible only through the process of our pondering its strangeness. As we watch *hang*, and as tucker green accounts rationally for her imagined world, we are obliged to consider the connections as well as disconnections between that world and our own. By slightly exaggerating the logic of neoliberalism, *hang* posits a future in which the commodification of everything has extended to the dispensation of justice. In challenging audiences to rationalize this eerily familiar future, the play thus poses an important question. What in the historical present has caused this disturbing yet uncannily familiar future to take shape? We might even understand *hang* as a meditation on how neoliberalism drives the logic of the market into the fabric of everyday life and in so doing co-opts discourses from below, those that stress choice and participation, for example, or the responsibilities of the active citizen. In *hang* Three’s participation, her exercising of individual choice, becomes the node through which justice is dispensed. In this sense the play is a kind of grim satire.

tucker green is a political playwright of extraordinary acuity, formal ingenuity and verbal audacity. In plays such as *dirty butterfly* (2003), *born bad* (2003), *trade* (2004), *stoning mary* (2005), *generations* (2005), *random* (2008), *truth and reconciliation* (2011), *nut* (2013) and *hang* (2015), she has utilized a range of theatrical forms and a heightened poetic linguistic register to offer an excoriating critique of the ethical failures that characterize the contemporary

moment. Her trenchant attack on cruelty in all its forms has been staged via formal strategies such as those described above, but also and importantly, through a distinctive approach to language. Elaine Aston has described tucker green's work as 'a black urban voicing of the experimental and experiential; a scratching and mixing of elliptical strains and cruel sensations'.¹² Cruelty has certainly been a consistent focus for tucker green. More specifically, she has been concerned to expose the the failure in empathy that allows cruelty to persist, and to give voice to the grief and anger that understandably proceeds from such failure. Taking as her starting point the speech patterns of black Londoners, she utilizes techniques and tropes drawn from black poetry and hip hop, to generate a strikingly original dramatic poetry. If tucker green is, as Deidre Osborne has convincingly argued, the most 'uncompromisingly poetic dramatist, in contemporary British theatre' her poetry is also distinctive because it is marked by aggression.¹³ In her work, as Maggie Inchley notes, 'the voice is used as a form of musical artillery' often 'shocking the audience with its sheer venom'.¹⁴ In perhaps the most widely quoted example of poetic invective in tucker green's oeuvre the young woman Mary, in *stoning mary*, chastises the many women who have failed either to march, or sign a petition for a stay in her execution:

What about the burn their bra bitches?

The black bitches

The rootsical bitches

The white the brown bitches

The right-on bitches ...

The bitches that love to march?

The bitches that love to study ...

The lyrical bitches

The educated bitches

The full-uppa-attitude bitches

The high-upsed rich list lady bitch-

Bitches

¹² Elaine Aston, 'debbie tucker green', in Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schmierer and Aleks Sierz eds., *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* (Methuen: London, 2011), 183-202, p.183.

¹³ Deidre Osborne, 'Resisting the Standard and Displaying Her Colours: debbie tucker green at British Drama's Vanguard' in Mary F. Brewer, Lynette Goddard and Deidre Osborne eds. *Modern and Contemporary Black British Drama* (Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke, 2015), 161- 177, p.162

¹⁴ Maggie Inchley, *Voice and New Writing, 1997-2007: Articulating the Demos* (Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke, 2015), p.95.

whadafuckabout them?¹⁵

Here, the repetition of the word *bitch*, recalls the rhythmic patterning of hip hop, and gives Mary's speech greater vehemence by imitating the iterations natural to expressions of great emotion. tucker green is also keenly aware of the political impact of word choice. The misogyny inherent in the word *bitch*, which is evoked deliberately here, is used to explode the illusion of a community of women, as is the dividing of women into different and not necessarily complimentary groups of interest.

In this article I want to pay attention to the uses of anger and aggression in tucker green's *hang*. My aim is to demonstrate that by employing what Patricia Hills Collins calls 'fighting words' the playwright not only challenges normative conceptions of victimhood – especially black female victimhood, which is often represented as traumatized, silenced and abject – but stages ethical dilemmas based on assumptions different than those that commonly underpin contemporary English political theatre(s).¹⁶ This, I will argue, is her distinctive contribution.

Active Silences and Fighting words

tucker green's protagonists are often angry women, or more specifically angry black women. In fact, to paraphrase Sara Ahmed, watching a tucker green play typically involves a reading of anger as a response. Her work moves us through and with anger into an interpretation of what the characters and/or playwright might be angry about, thereby generating 'associations and connections between the object of anger and broader patterns or structures'.¹⁷ It seems important to note that tucker green is working with anger at a moment when arguments thought to have been lost about the appropriateness of forceful feminist critique have resurfaced. A recent essay by Sarah Franklin reminds us, for example, of the frequency with which 'breath-taking incidents of sexism are still so ubiquitous and so ordinary' in the lives of female academics.¹⁸ Franklin's examples – drawn largely from personal experience – also demonstrate that drawing attention to such incidents is risky because sexism is so often trivialized or dismissed as problems of perception. In this way its origins are effectively reassigned to the

¹⁵ debbie tucker green, *stoning mary* (Nick Hern Books: London, 2005), p. 62.

¹⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1998).

¹⁷ Sarah Ahmed, 'Feminist Futures' in Mary Eagleton ed., *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2003), 236-254, p.248.

¹⁸ Sarah Franklin, 'Sexism as a Means of Reproduction: Some Reflections on the Politics of Academic Practice', *New Formations*, 86 (2015), 14-33, p.15.

persons – usually women – who persists in complaining about it. Indeed, as Franklin’s essay shows, this process of reassignment is one of the means by which sexism reproduces itself. Sexism would disappear, in this (sexist) way of thinking, if only certain women would lighten up, calm down and stop complaining. Franklin calls the woman who refuses to be passive in the face of the injustice, a ‘wench in the works’, and this figure has something in common not only with Ahmed’s feminist killjoy, but with the many female characters in tucker green’s plays who willfully resist the cultural imperative to follow gendered happiness scripts.¹⁹

The pervasive characterization of feminists as spoilsports that Ahmed tracks across contemporary popular and political discourse in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and *Willful Subjects* (2014), is taken up in tucker green’s plays, and is often used to problematize cultural imperatives to either ‘get along with people’ or ‘go along with things’. As Ahmed reminds us, not only do feminist killjoys ‘not place their hopes for happiness in the right things ... they speak out about their unhappiness with the very obligation to be made happy by such things’.²⁰ In *hang*, Three is obviously made unhappy by the actions of her attacker and the suffering wrought upon her family, but she is also willing to communicate her unhappiness about the quality of her interactions with the justice system. At the beginning of the play, having refused the offer of a drink with only a shake of the head, she continues to communicate her dissatisfaction through ‘active’ silence:

ONE ... Is your husband (coming)? I think you said he was – did you say he was on his way?

THREE

ONE Are we ... should I ...? Is he going to ...?

THREE

ONE I don’t want to – I mean it’s fine if you want us to, need us to hang on for a while we’re happy / to ²¹

This exchange ends with Three’s declarative sentence – ‘He’s not coming’ – which is in stark contrast to One’s tentative questioning.²² When One suggests moving the appointment to a more convenient time, Three is again silent. She says nothing when asked if anyone else is

¹⁹ Ibid., p.16.

²⁰ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2010), p.60.

²¹ tucker green, *hang*, p.5.

²² Ibid.

coming.²³ Indeed, for most of early part of the play Three is either actively silent or giving curt negative responses, often comprised simply of the word no. The unsounded parts of these exchanges – the silences – have a particularly powerful resonance which unsettles One and Two, making them nervous and uncomfortable. Consequently, Three’s ‘failure to be happy’ about their efforts to make her happy can be read as ‘sabotaging the happiness of others’, an action that identifies her as a feminist killjoy.²⁴ Her pronounced lack of concern for One and Two’s discomfort also works to expose their repeated attempts at empathy as little more than empty rhetoric. ‘This is about you, and about you feeling as comfortable as we can make you feel’, One assures her, for example, but Three’s stony silence quickly prompts Two to identify this concern as something acquired in training. Three response heightens his anxiety:²⁵

THREE training to teach you that
TWO Well –
THREE train you hard to know that?
TWO Umm – ²⁶

If, as Ahmed argues, ‘[m]aintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies “go along with it”’, Three’s refusal draws attention to the coercion on which such comfort is built.²⁷

A crucial aspect of *hang*’s staging of discomfort is the extent to which Three appears both aware and in control of it. Here, as elsewhere in tucker green’s work, a pronounced absence of female passivity is both striking and also racially inflected. As black feminists such as Angela Davis and Hortense Spillers have argued, black women are well placed to disrupt white gender discourses that posit femininity as passive because they are descended from women (and men) whose experience placed them outside the ranks of normative gender. Kathryn Bond Stockton notes how far, for example, ‘neither leisure nor their own housework has formed the focus of black women’s lives’.²⁸ Because ‘gendering’, as Spillers argues, primarily ‘takes place within the confines of the domestic’, generations of black women were

²³ Ibid., p.7.

²⁴ Ahmed, ‘Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness’, p.582.

²⁵ Ibid., p.14.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁷ Sara Ahmed, ‘Feminist killjoys (and other willful subjects)’. *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 8(3) 2010, p.4. Available at: http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed_01.htm (accessed 24 March 2017)

²⁸ Kathryn Bond Stockton, ‘Heaven’s Bottom: Anal Economics and the Critical Debasement of Freud in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*’ in Sandra Kumamoto Stanley ed., *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1998),p.288. See also, Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983).

excluded from the white bourgeois ideal of feminine passivity.²⁹ Their lives – as sex workers, field workers, factory workers, or domestic workers under white management – were instead explicitly tied to ‘production circuits in dominant economies’.³⁰ In this way of thinking, black women are particularly well placed to disrupt patriarchy, by operating precisely from the ungendered margin to which they have been consigned. Spillers drives the argument home when she writes: ‘This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, *out* of the traditional symbolics of female gender ... less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject’.³¹ tucker green’s distinctive contribution to contemporary drama, I wish to suggest, is to draw on these black feminist traditions to trouble, among other things, assumptions about gender construction that underwrite most white feminist criticism. After all, one thing that is supposed to make educated Western women happy is ‘feminism’ itself, but as the ‘bitches’ speech in *stoning mary* attests, tucker green is acutely aware that even within feminism, ‘some bodies more than others can be attributed as the cause of unhappiness’.³² Both *Mary* and *Three* are manifestations of the ‘angry black woman’ who kills ‘feminist joy ... by pointing out forms of racism within feminist politics’.³³ The myth of conventional feminist sympathy is satirized in *hang* via One’s cliché ridden attempts to identify with Three’s suffering, and by Three’s ability to see through this ruse. In this way the origin of the problem is exposed. To paraphrase Ahmed, the officials continue to read the situation as ‘about the unhappiness of’ Three, ‘rather than about what’ Three is actually ‘unhappy about’.³⁴ Three reads the situation differently:

THREE This isn’t about me.
 I think it’s all about him.
 Still. ...
 He wants to know.
 You want to know.
 You want to know so you can tell him. ...

²⁹ Hortense J. Spillers, ‘“Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe”: An American Grammar Book’, *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987), pp. 64-81, p.72.

³⁰ Stockton, ‘Heaven’s Bottom’, p. 288.

³¹ Spillers, ‘“Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe”’, p.80.

³² Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 67.

³³ *Ibid.* Often a black woman does not even need to speak to be a source of tension in this context. Listen to bell hooks’ account of attending a ‘meeting to discuss feminist theory’: ‘the atmosphere will noticeably change when a woman of color enters the room. The white women will become tense, no longer relaxed, no longer celebratory’, bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (Pluto Press: London, 2000), p.56.

³⁴ Ahmed, ‘Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness’, p. 583.

I'm here. So you can know. So you can tell
him. So he can find out.
... This isn't about me at all. Is it?³⁵

Rather than go along with any officially sanctioned version of the purpose of their encounter, and rather than directing her anger solely at her attacker, Three instead raises questions that make visible the criminal justice system's assumptions about victimhood and the politics of participation.

A Wench in the Works

Since coming to prominence in 2003 with *dirty butterfly* and *born bad*, the latter of which won the Olivier Award for Most Promising Newcomer, tucker green has built a formidable reputation as a confrontational playwright of formal and verbal distinctiveness. Her impact was fairly immediate. By 2009 she was considered, as Lynette Goddard has noted, 'the leading black British woman playwright of the first decade of the twenty-first century' and is unusual, as a black female playwright, in having had three plays premiered on the main stage of the Royal Court: *stoning mary*, *random* and *hang*.³⁶ Although she emerged as a major talent in a decade during which black playwrights made significant forays onto the main stages of subsidized metropolitan theatres in the UK, and consequently began to attract national critical attention, tucker green's work has been more extensively critiqued from outside the field of black theatre scholarship than that of her contemporaries.³⁷ This is arguably because, although her work is consciously and purposefully racially inflected, it can be distinguished from that of her contemporaries Kwame Kwei-Armah, Roy Williams and Bola Agbaje, by its rejection of realism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this rebuttal, in combination with her woman-centred dramaturgy, has attracted the attention and admiration of feminist scholars who have made

³⁵ tucker green, *hang*, p. 20-21.

³⁶ Lynette Goddard, 'debbie tucker green' in Dan Rebellato ed., *Modern British Playwriting 2000-2009* (Bloomsbury: London, 2013), 190-212, p.190.

³⁷ In May 2003 Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen* was produced at the National Theatre, followed a few weeks later by Roy William's *Fallout* at the Royal Court. tucker green's *born bad* won the Olivier in the same year and *Elmina's Kitchen* transferred to the Garrick in London's West End in 2005. Subsequently, most critics identified the noughties as a breakthrough decade for black British playwrights. Lynette Goddard's recent monograph *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: Margins to Mainstream* (Palgrave: Basingstoke 2015), acknowledges this shift in its title, for instance, while elsewhere Deirdre Osborne has related the phenomenon to a change in the perceived commercial viability of black writing for white as well as black audiences. See, Osborne, 'The State of the Nation: Contemporary Black British Theatre and the Staging of the UK' in Dimple Godiwali ed., *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: Black British and Asian Theatres* (Cambridge Scholars Press: Newcastle, 2006), 82-100.

connections between her work and an earlier generation of feminist playwrights, especially Caryl Churchill.³⁸ In addition, as Elaine Aston has observed, in the early part of her career tucker green's unremittingly bleak subject matter – which included domestic violence, voyeurism and sexual exploitation – ‘occasioned the reception of her work as a late exponent of in-yer-face theatre’, and suggested an affinity between her approach and the experiential aesthetics of Sarah Kane.³⁹ For instance, tucker green's tactic in *stoning mary* of bringing problems generally sanitized by being figured as over ‘there’, over ‘here’, has obvious resonances with Kane's *Blasted* (1995).

Elsewhere, Deirdre Osborne has located tucker green firmly within ‘traditions of women's experimental writing’ and has understood her distinctive contribution as consisting in her ‘intricate plaiting of African-diasporic and European-intellectual inheritances’.⁴⁰ For Osborne the formal complexity and linguistic ingenuity of tucker green's work ‘prevents the diminishment of her drama to identity politics’.⁴¹ By contrast, as the only black critic to have written extensively about tucker green, Lynette Goddard has been less willing to see a focus on identity politics as necessarily impoverishing. Instead, she seeks to examine ‘how the aesthetic *and* social aspects’ of tucker green's plays ‘combine’ to produce their ‘overall impact’.⁴² tucker green's *generations* (2007) certainly gives weight to Goddard's argument. As this short play opens, three generations of a black South African family ‘are embroiled in a circular argument about who can cook the best, who coached who to cook and how they were each wooed by the cooking capabilities of their mate’.⁴³ The scene is infused with familial warmth and banter but as it draws to a close the atmosphere shifts as a choir begins to sing a lament. The action is then replayed five times. With each repetition one additional character is missing and their dialogue cut, until only the grandparents remain. As Lyn Gardner noted in

³⁸ In a rare interview tucker green actually acknowledges Churchill as an influence. See Royal Court, Young Writers Programme, Education Resources, *stoning mary*. Available at: <http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/files/downloads/StoningMary.pdf>. [accessed 31 October 2016]. Elaine Aston draws out the connection between tucker green and Churchill particularly astutely in her account of the former's work, ‘debbie tucker green’ in Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Alex Sierz eds. *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*. (Methuen: London, 2011), 183-202.

³⁹ Aston, ‘Feeling the Loss of Feminism’ p. 28. For a reading of tucker green's work as in-yer-face see Ken Urban ‘Cruel Britannia’ in Rebecca D'Monte and Graham Saunders eds. *Cool Britannia: British Political Drama in the 1990s* (Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke, 2008), 38-55.

⁴⁰ Osborne, ‘Resisting the Standard and Displaying Her Colours’, p.163. Although she rarely gives interviews, tucker green has acknowledged the influence of black women writers such as the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett, the American poet-playwright Ntozake Shange and hip hop artists such as Lauryn Hill on her work. Quoted in Lynette Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), p.185.

⁴¹ Osborne, ‘Resisting the Standard’, p. 164.

⁴² Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: Margins to Mainstream*, p. 70.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.133.

her review of the Young Vic production, as ‘members of the family leave the playing area, and their section of the dialogue is excised ... [the] word Aids is never mentioned, but the stage suddenly becomes crowded with an appalling absence ... [as] the choir raise the roof in lamentation’.⁴⁴ As plays such as *trade*, *stoning mary* and *generations* demonstrate, as well as exploring topical social issues as they affect black diasporic communities living in London, tucker green has created a body of work that moves beyond the borders of the UK to explore international human rights issues as they relate specifically to the legacy of colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean.

Miscommunication Lead to Complication⁴⁵

tucker green is not universally admired. She has been repeatedly criticized, for example, for her use of heightened demotic poetry, which a number of high profile theatre critics have objected to on the grounds that it is either difficult to understand for white audiences, or distracting in that it is inherently un-dramatic.⁴⁶ For the purposes of this article, I am less interested in these attacks, than in those that chastise tucker green, not so much for not being political enough, but for not being political in the right way(s). These responses are worth considering in a discussion about female anger, I think, not least because they reveal existing protocols for British theatrical discourse which encourage particular sorts of argument and discourage others. Indeed, the masculinist rhetoric employed by critics in this context might even be seen as spotlighting, however unconsciously, some of the things tucker green is angry about. In English theatre, existing dramaturgical models of reason and emotion – especially in relation to political theatres – persist in encouraging playwrights and audiences to structure and hear vehement arguments in particular ways. Norms of ‘restraint’ and of ‘reasoned’ argument are typically linked and subsequently related to norms of emotional demonstration. These norms of ‘restraint’ and ‘reasoned argument’ resonate aesthetically because they appear – or are made to appear – to offer a vision of an effective political theatre. Consequently, they authorize the chastising of individuals who do not adhere to them. As a result, political plays are regularly evaluated as if they were stand-ins for restrained face to face conversations about socio/political problems conducted according to white masculinist middle-class norms. It is in this context that identifying ‘over-heated passages’ such as the one in which ‘Jo describes at length her desire to piss’, as Robert Shore did in his review of tucker green’s *dirty butterfly*

⁴⁴ Lyn Gardner, ‘generations’ *Guardian*, 1 March 2007.

⁴⁵ Lauryn Hill, ‘Lost Ones’ from *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (Columbia: New York, 1998).

⁴⁶ For interested readers Elaine Aston gives a good account of this tendency, in ‘debbie tucker green’, p. 197.

(2003) should be understood.⁴⁷ In his review of *hang* Michael Billington has a good deal to say about tucker green's dramaturgical incompetence. 'In the course of 70 minutes' he tells us, *hang* 'offers a powerfully intense situation but denies us many of the traditional satisfactions of drama'.⁴⁸ Three 'is angry, vehement' and 'impassioned' he continues, but the drama is undermined because 'she combines the status of a victim with implacable certainty'.⁴⁹ The play would be more interesting and the character more convincing he concludes 'if she displayed a scintilla of doubt', like Hamlet or Aeschylus's Agamemnon.⁵⁰ The idea that tucker green might choose not be inspired by dead white men appears not to occur to Billington. Instead, his criticism requires those who argue for social justice from marginal or marginalized perspectives, set aside *their* concerns to meet a standard of the common good that in reality does not include them. Asking that those who present oppositional arguments rephrase them, or take their intensity down a notch, or pay more careful attention to the conventions of dramatic rhetoric, becomes a way of claiming that the problem the critic has with the play is merely a surface, and not a substantive one. Power has dropped out of the picture. Protocols about the appropriate structuring of arguments and dramatic narratives are invoked not to encourage equal dialogue but to manage subordinate groups.

'anger alone keeps me alive'⁵¹

Of course, Billington is not alone in thinking that victims – especially female victims – should react in particular and appropriate ways. Three's angry resolve, her belligerence and intransigence, is a rhetorical strategy employed by tucker green to compel attention to the operations of a civil society that only hears victims if they speak in particular ways. The hollowness of phrases such 'today is about you' or 'we know this decision can be a lot to live with' is established in the play both via their constant repetition by the civil servants, but also via Three's consistent rebuttal of them.⁵² Moreover, precision of her expression contrast's productively with the platitudes and evasions with which her concerns are met.. For instance, when she learns there has been a 'development' in her case – which turns out to be the letter

⁴⁷ Robert Shore, (2003) 'dirty butterfly' *Time Out*, 5 March 2003.

⁴⁸ Michael Billington, 'hang' *Guardian* 18 June 2015.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid. We should, of course, ask ourselves, who is this collective 'us' Billington feels able to speak to and from? He is clearly invisible to his own cultural position in this exchange. As Emma Cox has noted, Western dramatic forms and narrative traditions 'are not necessarily the first point of reference for artists who have experienced forced migration or are descended from forced migrants'. Emma Cox, *Theatre & Migration*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.19.

⁵¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press: Berkeley, 1984), p.152.

⁵² Ibid., p. 20, 61.

from the perpetrator – she may not know at once what the development is, but she understands she is once again being acted upon:

Because it seems to me that, every time there
is a '*development*' that development affects
my family ...
Your developments affect my sleep
How I sleep
That I don't sleep. Can't sleep. Still.
It affects their schooling ...
their future.
Fucked their future ...
Affects their concentration
Affects my work
my housework
my day to day
my laundry – washing piss-stained sheets
every day,
changing beds – *every day*
reassuring them *every day* and knowin it's
not workin.⁵³

This speech, and Three's eloquence and determination throughout the play, exposes another uneasy alliance: that between feminism and critical criminology. Three's extraordinary ability to express the extent of the devastation wrought on her family, challenges the romantic assumptions of radical deviancy theory that dismiss concerns about victims as the preserve of conservative thinkers and policy makers. In *hang* a heightened approach to language combines with the authority of the black female performer to produce an oppositional knowledge that emerges from a situation of oppression. By refusing to name the crime, tucker green ensures that our focus remains with the victim. This is not to argue that we are intended to feel comfortable with Three's determination to see her attacker hanged. Here, as in tucker green's other plays, anger is staged as a – not always legitimate – response to disturbing, traumatic and

⁵³ Ibid., 29-30.

violent events. By refusing to be happy, tucker green's killjoys expose inequality and unfairness as a precondition for the happiness of the privileged – or in the case of *hang*, the institutions of the privileged – making the status quo momentarily uncomfortable for those who are otherwise unaware of the privileges they enjoy.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed notes how far the history of Empire as a kind of forced 'happiness' haunts and distorts the postcolonial moment with the result that assimilation and integration function as happiness injunctions. Those who are unwilling or unable to respond to such imperative(s) Ahmed describes as 'affect aliens'.⁵⁴ tucker green's plays, I would argue, are replete with affect aliens whose persistent and often belligerent unhappiness works productively to expose the ideological loaded-ness of the happiness imperative. In this essay, I have been arguing that we might usefully see Three's anger in *hang*, through this lense. Racism and sexism are, as Audre Lorde reminds us, 'correctly perceived as hatred', and black women are singularly unable to 'avoid these distortions in their living'.⁵⁵ One reasonable response to this hatred is anger. That this anger can be an aesthetically and politically productive force, generating new knowledge and the impetus to resistance and action, is evidenced in *hang*, and repeatedly across tucker green's work. tucker green articulates her concerns primarily from the perspective of black female characters and in so doing demonstrates that for black women, whose agency is doubly diminished by processes of exclusion, anger can be a useful tool to puncture practices that remain the somatic norm in many institutional settings in the West. On tucker green's stage the angry black woman can be affectively alien because she affects others in the wrong way, as in *hang*, and because she functions as an unwanted reminder of histories that are disturbing, as of course does the play's title by deliberately evoking the imagery of lynching. Audiences for *hang* confront not only a troubling near future, but are obliged to consider how the histories of neoliberal relations of power have provided and continue to provide the material conditions for the emergence of such a future. In this sense, the process of historical change that might lead to a victim 'choosing' the method by which her assailant will be executed is as important as Three's story itself. *hang* looks simultaneously forward and backward as it constructs an imaginary future that carries within it the historical backdrop *to* that future.

⁵⁴ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, pp. 41-42.

⁵⁵ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, p.152.