Urban Geography for Yard Gals

WANG Qiong
Faculty of English Language & Culture,
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies

Introduction

Born in the early 1970s, Rebecca Prichard is seen as one of the new generation of playwrights that has invigorated the British dramatic scene with “frightening” theatrical landscapes[1]. The word “frightening” is used here to indicate the nature of their works labeled as “in-yer-face” theatre that challenges the audience’s expectation by creating a small space tight with unacceptable language, acts of violence and sexual taboos, which is defined as “something blatantly aggressive and provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid” in the New Oxford English Dictionary. Prichard’s Yard Gal, which won her the London Critics’ Circle “Most Promising Playwright” Award in 1998, is such a play that disturbs the audience with the naked violence of language and action. What is more, it echoes what Caryl Churchill has predicted at the close of her Top Girl: of a “frightening” future for disadvantaged young women—yard gals in East London.

Yard gals refer to the girls of yardies who are members of Jamaican or West Indian posses (gangs), usually drug dealers, or girls in a similar posse; and yard means a home or their native land. The play is about two yard gals (at least they
think they are), Boo and Marie, telling stories of their daily life, or as Boo puts it, “chatting shit, getting fucked, getting high and doing crimes”[2]. What is new about these girls is not only the way their life is blatantly presented, but the role they play on the street. The girls assume high autonomy and take much pride in themselves out on the street, which, along with the girls’ trajectory of different venues including a squad, a yardie’s place, the rave parties, the jail, the hospital, and retrospectively the kids’ home and Marie’s home, creates a space for the girl posse to make a living, to entertain, to fight, to show off, to relax and to be kept down. In this article, I will focus on the role of these various places. By analyzing their nature and relationship with the characters, I would like to unravel the cultural and social context that underline the “frightening” reality that this marginalized minority group faces, and to make a further suggestion that while the street of East End London provides a temporary space for the yard gals to employ ephemeral tactics to assert their power and subjectivity, it has more ruthlessly materialized their spiritual inability and orphanness.

The Street — Stage of Girl Power

Michel De Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) talks about a kind of urban scheme in which the powerful dwell at the central areas of “their own” whose ways of dealing with the space can be described as strategies, while the powerless take the peripheral areas that they do not own and negotiate with the surroundings with ephemeral spatial tactics[3]. His reflections on space and the powerless, though pointing at the social geographical context of urban consumerism, resonate with the urban trajectories discussed in this article. Hackney is a most abject place in London, where the underprivileged try to survive in their own ways. Yard gals’ Hackney, moreover, involves much of the elements that are relevant in constituting what Edward Soja classifies as Thirdspace. According to Soja, on top of the real and imagined spaces, there should be a third space other than the traditional binary of reality/imagination in studying space. The Thirspace, the lived space, can be seen as a “critical strategy” that he calls “thirling as Othering,” understood as “a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the ‘real’ material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through ‘imagined’ representations of spatiality”[4]. Thirdspace embodies the possibility of creative openness, especially in resistance to the oppressive power structures that are associated with the ideologies of Secondspace.
Soja’s articulation of Thirdspace focuses on this dimension as a space of resistance, as “politically charged”[5]. Thirdspaces “are ‘the dominated spaces’, the spaces of the peripheries, the margins and the marginalized. ... They are the chosen spaces for struggle, liberation, emancipation”[6]. Hackney in this sense represents a Thirdspace that is real marginalized yet inviting imagination from the dominant ideology, and of which, with the interaction of race, class and gender, the interpretation can be multilayered and hazed. In such a context, the right to present and interpret has become a most direct assertion of power. In this play, Boo disdains the public’s unauthoritative claim based upon a voyeuristic interest in the yard: “People talk a lot of shit about Hackney when they ain’t never been there, and they talk a lot of shit about yards when they ain’t never met none…”(5-6) Yard gals thus takes initiative beginning from rejecting outsiders’ imaginary interpretation and telling their own stories by themselves. The change of scenes is marked by the girls’ tactfully making use of four big cubes, which also suggests their momentary control of the space. In this abject and dominated space, the girls, through certain discourse and narrative strategies, or in Michel De Certeau’s words, ephemeral spatial tactics, create a space of their own where, despite their actual subjection to the dominant power structure, they can articulate and assert their power and subjectivity.

Marie and Boo do not have a home of their own. It is the street of Hackney that gives them a sense of belonging, as Boo claims: “I don’t leave my roots at all...I’m a Hackney gal.”(6) The street is their private and public space, and when Marie asks Boo to tell the audience “how tings run in a yard”, she means mainly the street where yardies and girls like them can socialize, including the lanes, facades of buildings, street gardens, shopping places, or congregational venues like a cafe or a club. The street offers freedom, safety and opportunities to get along with and win fame among gang members, not like those confined locale as a kids’ home, a school or a highly compartmented working place. There are several episodes when the street serves as a home, which promises safety and comfort for the girls. Marie and Boo talk about their sexual play with a policeman in his car. While a car signifies a temporarily private and secure space out on the street, it also indicates confinement and suffocation. When Marie is doing a blow job for him, she feels “like I was gonna be there for the rest of my life”(12-13), and she bites him. After the man gives Boo a slap on the face, they are quick enough to “dust it down the street” (13). All the comedy and danger involved in this incident are washed away once the girls are out on the street. No revenge mentioned, Marie and Boo are like two drops of
Another time the street offers comfort is after the gang members Deanne falls from the balcony of their squad and died, the posse reunite and loaf on the street. They intend no serious consumption but intruding those commercialized locus like a MacDonald only to tease people and make small spectacles to assert their presence. The street is both theirs and not theirs at the same time. After a short flamboyant Odyssey, they go down the canal and all fall asleep on the grass. The canal is the domesticated river that does not run wild and dangerous, which represents the feminine part of the British society that maintains livelihood, the mother figure embodied in the street scene for the underclass. Sleeping by the canal temporarily makes up for the absence of a soothing parent in the family, and the girls recuperate for the next battle.

On the other hand, under Mrs. Thatcher’s administration during the 1980s, British women have been encouraged to go back to the home with “a nostalgia for the imperial past with ‘privatization’ and a regressive desire for the patriarchal family…using the rhetoric of free markets and personal freedom as part of the appeal”[7]. Among young women in the nineties, this appeal of freedom of choice and consumerism gives rise to the generation that exalts at the pursuit of an aggressive individualism. Girl power as what the Spice Girls chant, “get what you want”, has become a logo of the age, which, incited by the media presentation of a materialist, sexy and independent young woman through advertisement, soap opera and films, permeates into all aspects of social life. This pathos of the time echoes the third wave feminism in that they both highlight female sexuality (or sexystyle) for girl power, as Riordan elaborates, “While many third wave feminists focus on asserting one’s sexuality, it’s not necessarily for the male gaze. It’s often for a girl gaze, one that allows girls to be both subject and object.”[8] To exhibit one’s sexuality, for the yard gals, is a way to exhibit one’s power. Sabrina in the posse exemplifies this sexuality for her own terms. She has some “kriss garms”, hipsters, leggings and halter tops with sequins, and she “always look good” (10). She cares about her look, and even when she is fighting she always protects her hair, saying “Bitch, I fight you, but don’t be distressing my weave — took me all day star — right (Ibid)?” The star in the posse, Sabrina ironically “was skinny”, which, in accordance with the consumerist assumption of a hip female as represented by the fashion industry, actually contradicts with the traditional male preference of rounded and voluptuous figures. Everywhere she goes, boys will be coming up to her, saying “Sistah ya looking fit star”(Ibid). This subversion of the male aesthetical...
norms, while ostensibly points to the power of commercialization, more represents the anti-reproductive womanhood and non-domestic identity that are part of the appeal of the so called “popular feminism” of the nineties. Dressing sexually helps one win bways (boys), yet “she weren’t no airhead. She knew how to brush them bways” (11). None of the girls in the posse is thinking of having a boy in similar posses, as they know how these yard bways work with romance by sweeting up young girls, getting them pregnant and putting them to work as prostitutes. Without a chance to know boys outside their circle, the girls entertain themselves with sexuality in dressing up and tantalizing men’s desires, which again, if operated successfully, will transform into power. They profit from men’s desire. Another girl in the posse, Threse, described as “bold” and “blatant” by Marie and Boo, seems to understand her power by being “just out there, on the streets, in her batty riders with her bum hangin’ out”, hustling, grafting, fronting and dealing (6). The street now provides a platform for the girls to entertain and more importantly, to exploit whatever they want from men, and with their gains they buy more clothes to build up their sexuality and complete this cycle of desire, men’s desire to gaze and girls’ desire to profit from the gaze and thus achieve subjectivity.

While spotlighting girl power through exhibition and investment of sexuality, the street is also the place to showcase one’s power through violence. Boo’s tough claim “On the street you go up or you go down” (31) used to be seen as the label of underworld masculinity, yet now the gender roles seem to be blurred. Girl gangs in Britain has become an issue since the 1990s. The formerly invisible or insignificant auxiliaries in male-dominated gangs now have come to the front to form their own all-girl posses, doing their own business fighting on their own. Marie and Boo excite at the fact that Sabrina “could fight man”, and so she is bad (11). Boo does not grudge in calling herself a rude gal, and when the rival girl gangs are confronting each other, they firstly try to knock down each other with verbal insult, like when Wendy says to Threse in the Rave club: “You ain’t no yard gal. You’s a white gal for a start.”(20) Bad gal, rude gal and yard gal (with the reversed racial discrimination of Jamaican or black over white native) are equated to toughness girls in a street gang rely on to survive and take pride in. They have to be tough as the world outside is tough, with bad boys (with the typical example of yard guys) for whom “the only people they wouldn’t kill is them that’s already dead”(14), bad families like Marie’s father who violently beats and sexually abuses her, corrupted part of the institution like the police they used to be “sexually friendly with”, and
the rival gangs that would kill. Similar to male gangs, violence is an efficient means for the girl gangs to protect themselves and testify their status on the street. There are a few times when Boo describes themselves as “like an animal”(21). Glassing with beer bottle, cutting with knives, and bare-handed fighting like tearing one’s ring off the nose between rival gang members are all imitation of bestial conventions to deter the enemy in demarcating one’s territory. Wendy the rival gang leader warns Marie’s gang not to “steal their punters” and “deal on their page”(11), and the consequence of violating that rule is the gang fight and Marie’s big cut in the stomach. Violence even helps one resist the mighty state apparatus, as Threse brags, (in the police station) “I give them licks...they have to let me go to get rid of me” (7).

Yard gals engage in masculinity to gain the power traditionally identified with men or boys, and with violent scenes part of their daily life to sort out problems, they develop a sense of pride that they enjoy the power and freedom long denied to girls. The sense of freedom and empowerment culminates at the place that best manifests the contemporary street culture, the rave club. It is in the rave club that sexuality and violence so intimately forges to create a yard gal image. Here femininity does not compromise violence, on the contrary, sexuality and prowess are supportive to each other. The girls dress in their lacy tops and thigh boots they can afford after hours’ of grafting, spend hours on their hair just to “look the biz [best]” and they are all “in a loving mood” (constantly taking drugs to keep high), with “nasty dances” and “a dirty rub up with a nice man”(15). While all attractive and sensual, the girls are constructive (armed), and are always getting into fights. Violence has been such a routine in Trenz the rave club that people keep dancing at the murder scene and get vexed because the music stops. Non-stop music, drinks and drugs, and the sexual vibe felt by everybody make the rave club a powerful locus of transgression and ecstasy. The pleasure of transgression infiltrates the sub-culture of this under-privileged minority group, which is incited and prolonged after they take drugs. With the consistent etherization of gear, the inflated self becomes invincible, which explains why Boo does not feel a thing after a lock of her hair is pulled off. Drug abuse here seems more recreational, like the way they do their crimes in the club. The girls seem to have built a temporary utopia with the emersion of speed and jungle music. Some critics smell the “political indifference” in this play, as Lloyd Evans writes in The Spectator, “the life of the crack-whore in her squat is, to her, not just acceptable but attractive. She has attained a kind of
excellence, an insurpassability. No one can sink lower than she has and this gives her a sense of eminence, uniqueness even, in which she’s bound to take pride.[9] Since from the beginning these girls are expelled from the normative social system and deprived of their rights to enjoy the welfare and opportunities in education and job prospect, they literally take the liberty to stay beyond social constraints, seek power through sexuality and violence with their own values, enjoy the freedom promised by such lawless life and make the best of the street.

One’s Own Place and Heterotopias—Power Lost and Orphanness

Apart from asserting one’s existence and power, the spatial practice that the powerless actuate on the margins beyond the dominating structure also provides the possibility to construct what Michel Foucault refers to as a heterotopia. Foucault defines a heterotopia as “something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted”[10]. This kind of sites are the heterogeneous fissures that the powerless create in between the spaces of the grand narrative, which, in Billingham’s reading of Foucault, not only refer to places of difference, but “that involves the effect of misplacement or displacement”[11]. In fact, Foucault mentions the heterotopias of deviation, “those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed”[12]. These heterotopias function like a mirror, through which the dominant homogeneous social power and its encounter with the resistance from the heterogeneous part are reflected. Yard gals’ Hackney in the last act of the play ostensibly illustrates the existence and function of such heterotopia.

There are three acts in this play, the first two about the gang girls’ life on the street with the description of each gang member and some childhood recollection, the fight which caused Marie’s hospitalization and consequently her killing Wendy and Boo taking the blame as Marie is pregnant. In Act Three the audiences experience a sudden downfall from the intensive scenes of sexuality and violence spiced by the live street slang to the serious and solemn reading of letters by Boo in prison and Marie outside with most of the bold and witty energy stripped off. Just like the play’s shift “from reckless euphoria to a sense of lost opportunities, broken friendship and lives of mere endurance”[13] in Act Three, if the focus is directed away from the home-like or hormone-infused parts of the street, the audience will find the girls’ sense of power and pride a little too superficial or self-deceiving.
Sexuality and violence are only ways to cover up their helplessness. Exposure of one's body does not really lead to power and the use of their sexuality brings no more than some punters' money that only help sustain the lowest form of survival. As for female violence, Prichard remarks:

The central paradox is that violence is the opposite of assertiveness; it comes from a sense of feeling completely helpless...Women should be able to develop their own forms of strength, without trying to behave like men. Female violence is a product of desperation rather than a quest for identity...violence comes from being paranoid and completely wired on drugs...violence is an illness.\[^{14}\]

Living at the ill part of the society, with ill up-bringing, the girls are actually powerless. They do not have a place they can call their own. From Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* to the 1970s' appeal to find or claim a place of one's own, the concept of women's own space has always been a significant issue in feminism. The space indicates various locational needs and desires, including the public space for female voices, the private space for independent ways of living and thinking, and the metaphorical body as the space. Without their own space, women can never assume real power. In later development as inspired by the materialist and individualistic popular feminism, this claiming a place of one's own turned into the precept that if you do not have a space of your own, you can simply take over others' space. Marie and Boo's posse is composed of six girls, two (Boo and Deanne) from the kids' home, Marie who used to live with her abusive father, and three others (Sabrina, Threse and Nadine) whose families are not normal enough for them to go back regularly. So they claim a place in an old block of flats, a squat. Although the girls' effort to make it a home-like place can be seen on the floor "covered in blankets an' old cans and candles", the condition of this squat symbolizes their vain attempt to a strong and integrated self, "empty and cold...window smashed...It always felt like somebody died in there"(22), and the dream of one's own space shatters with Deanne's accidental-on-purpose fall from the balcony of the squat. Deanne's death comes from the influence of drugs, the news about Nadine being smashed with similar picture of the girls' future, and her request to go back to the kids' home upset. Even if she goes back to the kids' home, however, it makes no difference, as the kids' home is a "nut house" with "nuff drink and nuff gear in there", like any other battered places at the street corner. Before and after Deanne's death, the two protagonists go to two other places upon which
they still have some vague illusions of warmth and sense of belonging. Boo goes to the place of Nero, a well-off dealer, an older man who “weren’t into violence at all” and “can love sweetly”(14). But this father-surrogate looks tired at Boo’s impulse to tell him about her birthday, usually the topic among intimate friends and families. Marie goes back to her father’s, only to be treated the usual way, smashed. The girls cannot even call their bodies their own. Though seemingly powerful and able to profit from their sexuality, their bodies are no more than a tool for meager survival. The use of their bodies does not promise a future they want. Threse talks about her dream of earning enough money through drug dealing and go to Bahamas, but they all know she is “talkin’ rubbish”. Boo has learnt that wanting things makes her unhappy, so she teaches herself not to. Finally, like Boo, the body has to be kept down and sent to a place like the jail to be molded at other people’s will.

Apart from the places they want to claim, there are places where they do not want to stay—the police station, the jail, the hospital and the job centre. When put in a police cell for the rave fights, Sabrina shouts “Yeah das how we run ting in a ghetto, we jus’ deal wi’ ting up front, you know wha’ me a say, then poliss dem come an mek enquiry, dem write it ahn papah, ‘alf hour fi’ dis, ‘alf hour fi’ dat, but man nah stop kill man seen. Man nah stop rob man, seen, me I love unity, peace, strengt’, and equality, but a wha’ gwan on in a ghetto mi bruddah?”(21) The white girl Sabrina is described acidly by Boo as doing her “Jamaica act”, mimicking some clichéd rhetoric from maybe the hip hop music that prevails in street culture. While in jail, Boo describes her situation as “if they treat me like an animal I will be an animal”(39), and she does not express much optimism concerning her life after getting out of the jail, “I don’t think they should lock people away ya know. I feel like me life is sorted for me. I dunno how I’ll feel when I get out. I think I’ll feel lonely and lost.”(42) The comic and bleak tone applied with these two figures both point at the futility and ineffectiveness of the prison in promising any substantial change in societal stability and prisoners’ future after jail. These “complete and austere institutions”, in Foucault’s terms, provide “a total education” that aims not at the free development of individuals but at a kind of normalization, molding these inmates to make them socially “conform” “by location, confinement, surveillance, the perpetual supervision of behavior and tasks”.[15] The girls, mostly underclass convicts, are forced to receive this education with no regards to the fact that the missing educational preparation in their early life can not be patched up by the penitary streamline. The sense of loss and fear is inevitable as they do not want
their life to be “sorted”. Even a hospital or a job center that boasts benevolence does not guarantee any real help. When Boo is visiting Marie who is sent to the hospital for her cut on the stomach, Marie expresses a strong desire to leave the hospital and get back to their “normal”: “I’m clucking bad in here...Soon as I come out, first night we’ll go up Trenz innit. See the posse. Everything’ll be back like normal.”(33) While in jail Boo learns that Marie has been to a job center, and with great contempt she writes: “We haunt some low places but a job center—I never think ya go so low.”(39) The girls reject these institutional aid not because they are strong enough, but such institutions, including the prison, the hospital, the job center, the kids’ home and Boo’s school, are all part of Foucault’s “penal domain” which exerts its power upon all inmates and make sure they are within the social norm of a certain hierarchy. The girls are always at the bottom of this social hierarchy. Their being thrown into this social norm only causes “panicky feelin” for having long been neglected and alienated, they “can’t understand what they saying”(39). They do not want to trade their underworld expertise with the awkward and vain attempt to be “normal”. With the disintegration of their posse and the broken friendship, what yard gals can see for their future is best illustrated by their last line “Can we go?” which echoes a bleak Beckettian uncertainty.

Here the squad, kids’ home, the job center, the hospital and the prison constitute the sample of a heterotopia, which is both real and unreal, and which, while promising everything a utopia is to both individuals and society, only exposes more poignantly the incommensurability between the dominant social forces and the marginalized.

Conclusion

Benedictine Nightingale remarks on Yard Gal that if such a play “had been written 20, 15, even 10 years ago, it would have been very different”, as “few dramatists of that era would have been able to resist making it abundantly evident that its two teenage characters were victims of society and society itself was in urgent need of institutional reform”[16]. Though working with Clean Break, a company dedicated to helping female prisoners and ex-offenders, Prichard wrote without a clear political appeal. The space she creates for the yard gal performance at most serves as a heterotopia of deviation, a mirror of the norm of the British society which constitutes a reality where schools do not educate, hospitals do not heal, and social welfare system do not rescue the helpless. Traversing different
places in East London, her protagonists exhibit self-reliance, triumph over men’s weakness, and battle-hardened pride on one hand, yet on the other hand, their female identity, underclass background and failure in fitting in the social norm are contradicting the empowered yard gal image. Finally the girls fall into sheer emptiness, fear and perplexity back on the street, with no prospect from any substantial institutional aid as the author explicitly expresses her pessimistic outlook on the function and operation of such state apparatus. Maybe this is the feature of the time, when these in-yer-face playwrights address social problems in their blatant and weird ways, or we can end this article with Nightingale’s conclusion in his *Future of Theatre*: “They relish the oddball, the misfit, the bizarre; but they are troubled by the helplessness and unhappiness they see around. They are vastly entertaining yet they radiate moral concern. They are Mrs. Thatcher’s disorientated children.”[17]

Notes:
[1] Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt. eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000: 2.
[2] Rebecca Prichard. *Yard Gal*. New York: Dramatist’s Play Service, 2001: 5. Quotations from the novella will hereafter be referenced by page number only.
[3] Certeau M de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984: 37.
[4] Edward W. Soja. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1996: 5-6.
[5] Ibid., 35.
[6] Ibid., 68.
[7] Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt. 14.
[8] Ellen Riordan. “Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls: Consuming and Producing Feminism”, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 25:3 (July 2001) 292.
[9] Lloyd Evans. *The Spectator*, 14 November 2008.
[10] Michel Foucault. “Of Other Spaces,” *The Visual Culture Reader* ed., Nicholas Mirzoeff, London & New York: Routledge, 2002, 229-236: 231.
[11] Peter Billingham. *Sensing The City Through Television* (Bristol, GBR: Intellect Books, 2000) 119.
[12] Michel Foucault. “Of Other Spaces,” 232.
[13] Spencer. Ch. 1994. *Daily Telegraph* 21.4. in *Theatre Record* Vol. XIV/8:443.
[14] A. Sierz. *In-Yr-Face Theatre – British Drama Today* London: Faber & Faber, 2001: 230.
[15] Michel, Foucault. “On Power,” *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Internews and Other*
Writings, 1944-1984 ed., Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans., Alan Sheridan. New York & London: Routledge, 1990: 105.

[16] Benedictine Nightingale. quoted from Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt, 2-3.
[17] Benedictine Nightingale. The Future of Theatre. London: Phoenix, 1998: 20.

WANG Qiong, currently a lecturer at the Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. M. A. in Translation Studies at Sichuan International Studies University, China and in Literary and Cultural Studies at Lancaster University, UK. Interested in literary and cultural studies.