‘THE BRITISH PEOPLE HAVE SPOKEN’:
THE MONOLOGUE IN THE BREXIT SHORTS SERIES
Shauna O’Brien

Abstract
On 24 June 2016, veteran political commentator David Dimbleby announced the result of the EU Referendum. ‘The British people have spoken’, he said, ‘and the answer is we’re out.’ While it was clear that 52% had voted to leave the EU, what was less certain was exactly how this exit should be realised. To further complicate matters, the divisive rhetoric deployed during the campaign period had served to yoke each side to broader socio-political issues and, in the aftermath of the referendum, various factions were claiming the result as an endorsement for their own ideological viewpoints. If the British people had indeed spoken by voting to Remain or Leave the EU, as Dimbleby had declared, then their voices had effectively been purloined in the process and recirculated in the public sphere to express ideological viewpoints they did not necessarily all hold or share.
Perhaps a large degree of circumspection should be applied, therefore, to any artistic project that claimed to be ‘giving voice’ to these voters. After all, it was the dichotomising lens of the EU Referendum that had arguably reduced voters to these polarised abstractions in the first place. Yet this was precisely the claim made by one of the earliest theatrical responses to the EU referendum – Brexit Shorts, a series of nine short monologues commissioned by Headlong Theatre and the Guardian. This project proffered itself as a possible remedy to the gulf that had opened up between voters on each side of the intractable referendum divide. In this article, I will interrogate the reasons why this project chose to adopt the monologue to pursue this goal, a theatrical form that might initially appear too limited to present the polyvocal and complex reactions of the British people to Brexit.

Keywords: monologue, Brexit, online theatre, Guardian, Headlong Theatre

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Banner image: Rita Duffy, Soften the Border, 2017 (detail). Recycled fabrics, installation on the Belcoo, Blacklion Bridge - Co. Fermanagh / Co. Cavan border, 2.5 x 30m. Image credit: Copyright of the artist, Rita Duffy. Photo credit: Stanislav Nikolov
‘THE BRITISH PEOPLE HAVE SPOKEN’: THE MONOLOGUE IN THE BREXIT SHORTS SERIES

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Introduction
On 24 June 2016 at 4:40am, veteran political commentator David Dimbleby announced the results of the EU Referendum. ‘The British people have spoken’, he said, ‘and the answer is we’re out’ (Engineer, 2016). In the aftermath of the result, however, commentators struggled to decipher exactly what ‘out’ meant, an ontological conundrum that reached its nadir with the answer proffered by the newly appointed Prime Minister Theresa May that ‘Brexit means Brexit’. It was clear that 52% of British voters who had participated in the referendum had chosen to leave the EU. What was less certain was exactly how this exit should be realised. While the former PM David Cameron had claimed that the EU referendum would offer voters a ‘straight in-out’ option, the truth was that this dichotomisation was anything but straightforward for the voting public. Indeed, it was the distillation of the question down to a binary choice that arguably problematized for voters their support for one option over another.

After all, the EU Referendum became a site onto which voters’ broader anxieties were projected and ultimately manipulated. What was perhaps initially envisaged as a simple question to answer became complicated by the increasingly divisive rhetoric that was being ever more aggressively employed by referendum campaigners as the polling date drew closer. Foreboding economic forecasts were presented by Remain campaigners to cast Leave campaigners asreckless and ill-informed. Leave campaigners dismissed these claims as fearmongering, arguing that these forecasts were being propagated by a Westminster/metropolitan elite whose only concern was to maintain the status quo that was keeping them in power. Vote Leave notoriously pledged a sum of £350 million that the UK paid to the EU weekly to the NHS if Britain voted to leave, a claim repeatedly invoked even after it was debunked. Most contentious, however, was the inflammatory anti-immigration rhetoric that was deployed by the Leave. EU campaigners in particular to convince constituents to vote for Brexit, with UKIP’s Nigel Farage unveiling a billboard that suggested that convoys of immigrants were marching on the UK from Syria.

The deployment of such divisive strategies to persuade the British public to vote Remain or Leave served to irrevocably yoke each side of the campaign to these issues, and view support for either side as an endorsement of the ideological views being expressed by their fellow Leave or Remain-voters – whether this was the case or not. Remain voters became homogenised as members of a metropolitan liberal elite, so-called ‘snowflakes’, who were out of touch with the ‘real’ British people, yet perfectly happy to preach what many saw as idealistic and lofty values to those bearing the brunt of these values’ consequences. Leave voters were moulded into another homogeneous group: poorly-educated ‘middle-Englanders’ who were assumed to be motivated by their xenophobia more than any sincere dissatisfaction with EU influence. It was taken for granted that these were the people who had googled ‘what is the EU?’ the day after the referendum.

If the British people had indeed ‘spoken’ by voting to remain or leave the EU, as Dimbleby had declared, their voices had effectively been purloined in the process and recirculated in the public sphere to express socio-political views they did not all necessarily hold or share. As Stephen Coleman observes, ‘[s]ubstituting votes for voices is a means of compressing multivocality into a single communicative act, designed to exclude qualification or nuance from the expression of preferences’ (2013, p.12). Perhaps a large degree of circumspection should, therefore, be applied to any artistic project that claimed to be ‘giving voice’ to these voters in the aftermath of the Brexit vote. After all, it was the dichotomising lens of the EU Referendum that had arguably reduced voters to these polarised abstractions in the first place. Yet, this was precisely the claim made by one of the earliest responses to Brexit by the British theatrical community – Brexit Shorts, a series of nine short monologues commissioned by Headlong Theatre and The Guardian and published on The Guardian’s website and Youtube almost a year after the referendum.

According to The Guardian’s Stage Editor, Chris Wiegand, these short dramas sought not only to interrogate ‘the causes and consequences of Brexit’ but also to ‘reflect the hopes and concerns of remainers and leavers’ (2017). In order to achieve this goal, this collaborative project tasked its participating playwrights from Scotland (A.L. Kennedy), Northern Ireland (Stacey Gregg), Wales (Gary Owen), and England (Abi Morgan, James Graham, Meera Syal, Maxine Peake, Charlene James, and David Hare) to respond to the referendum by writing monologues ‘from the perspective of their home region’. By providing nine short responses from different geographical and socio-political contexts, the series attempted to ‘lay bare [the United Kingdom’s] complex national responses’ to the referendum (Wiegand,
This article will interrogate the reasons why Headlong Theatre and The Guardian chose to address this contentious and complex issue with what at first glance appears to be one of the most limiting of theatrical forms – the monologue. Eddie Patterson defines the monologue broadly as ‘any sustained speech by a single subject that does not require an “other” to speak to, nor needs a reply’ (2015, p.13). In comparison with other theatrical approaches, the monologue is often considered a ‘static, even boring’, and ‘anti-dramatic’ form (Pavis, 1998, p.218). Furthermore, the very nature of its delivery (a solitary character addressing a non-speaking interlocutor) seems to undermine any prospect of a realistic portrayal of the speaking subject that the playwright or director could hope to conjure with its performance. This potentially heightened artifice of the monologue would appear to hinder rather than foster the identification of audiences with the monologue’s speaker. For a project attempting to parse out the reasons why the British people voted the way they did in the referendum and foster dialogue between individuals on both sides of this referendum divide, the artifice and univocal nature of the monologue form at first glance appears counterproductive. However, this article will attempt to demonstrate how the opposite is true. Drawing extensively on Judith Butler’s influential work Excitable Speech, this essay will explore how the monologue is a particularly suitable form to show what Butler refers to as the ‘disjuncture between utterance and meaning’ that lies at the heart of the British voters’ purloined voices (1997, p.87). Dividing these nine monologues into three groups, I discuss how each grouping of monologues explores a different facet of this ‘disjuncture’.

‘I talk like this because I am like this. I want to be’ (Kennedy, 2017). According to Butler, ‘language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body becomes possible’ (1997, p.5). Butler argues that interpellation ‘does not “discover” this body, but constitutes it fundamentally’ (p.5). Regardless of a subject’s affirmation or objection to these terms of address, this ‘force of interpellation continues to work’ and ‘force itself upon [the subject], to delineate the space [the subject] occup[ies], [and] construct a social positionality’ (p.33). Indeed, Butler argues that ‘one need not know about or register a way of being constituted for that constitution to work in an efficacious way’ (p.31). Consequently, the subject endures the trauma of being brought ‘into a linguistic world’ that ‘precedes [the subject’s] will’ (p.38) and, in effect, is ‘put in one’s place’ by such speech’ (p.4).

Three monologues in particular respond to this ‘linguistic vulnerability’ of the speaking subject: Stacy Gregg’s Your Ma’s a Hard Brexit, A.L. Kennedy’s Permanent Sunshine, and Gary Owen’s The Pines. Each of these monologues explores how their speakers are mapped according to national, social, linguistic, and religio-political labels, terms of address that have come to constitute who they are and appear to demarcate the boundaries of this identity. As Clare Wallace observes, the absence of a speaking interlocutor in the monologue form, allows the playwright ‘[to focus] attention intensely upon the speaker and upon the way in which s/he expresses her or himself’ (2006, p.6). In this way, the speaker’s language is ‘foregrounded’ in the monologue (p.6). This intense focus on the speaking subject facilitated by the monologue, therefore, presents playwrights with an effective medium to explore how ‘one is socially constituted’ in language (Butler, 1997, p.31). However, while these monologues demonstrate how these terms of address ‘produce [their characters’] social contours in space and time’ (p.34), they also show how this ‘founding subordination’ (p.38) provides the possibility for these contours to be negotiated and even reshaped by the speaking subject.

The reshaping of these ‘social contours’ is perhaps no more explicitly addressed than in Gregg’s monologue, in which the boundaries separating seemingly irreconcilable identities are challenged and undermined by the monologue’s speaker: a Protestant working-class woman from a Loyalist background (played by Bronagh Gallagher). Walking along the peace-line (a barrier separating predominantly Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland) with her young son, the woman (who remains nameless) describes how her partner, Craig, has applied for an Irish passport in the wake of the Brexit vote in order to secure work south of the border in the Republic of Ireland as well as Europe. This decision, however, has created a confrontation between herself and her father, a staunch Unionist and UVF supporter who she recalls ‘near blown a fuse’ when he learned of her partner’s plan. Unlike her father, however, the speaker does not consider Craig’s act a threat to her sense of identity. ‘I couldn’t give a toot’, she admits, her flexibility seeming to belie her Loyalist upbringing. As she points out, ‘[If] it means [Craig] won’t be seen off for work, he’s Irish’ (Gregg, 2017). Indeed, Craig’s application for an Irish passport and the speaker’s acquiescence to his decision arguably undermines what most viewers would regard as the mutual exclusivity of these two identities – Loyalist/ British and Irish/European (Gregg, 2017).

The speaker of A.L. Kennedy’s monologue,
in contrast, struggles to negotiate the labels conventionally attributed to him and used to exclude him from certain spheres of influence. Set in the city centre of Glasgow, the viewer follows the Remain-voting Chummy, a young Glaswegian man from a working-class background (played by Scott Reid), as he makes his way to George’s square. The director immediately presents Chummy as a so-called NED (defined in The Guardian as non-educated delinquent), as he stalks towards the camera, the hood of his Adidas tracksuit initially obscuring his face (Wiegand, 2017). The tone of his monologue, which is inflected with local slang and delivered in a strong Glaswegian accent, coupled with his confrontational style of addressing the camera seems at odds with his monologue’s socio-political observations and lyricism. That this combination of factors appears incongruous demonstrates the stereotypical representations of the ‘working-class’ that saturate various media and have come to constitute what this label signifies in the popular imagination. This ‘demographization’ of the British population that became widespread during the referendum is interrogated in Chummy’s monologue. ‘But you think I’m what?’ he asks the viewer, ‘[n]othing? Inappropriately urban? I’ve got a sociology degree’ (Kennedy, 2017). Working class yet Remain-voting, unemployed yet highly-educated, Chummy disrupts the labels ascribed to him to delimit his identity. He ridicules English politicians’ inability to relate to individuals like himself who do not conform to their categorisations, and the absurdity of populist politicians claiming that they can ‘speak for the neds of the world against the lefty elite?’ (Kennedy, 2017).

Perhaps the importance of language in constituting character is most significant, however, in Gary Owen’s monologue The Pines, the only contribution to the series delivered in a language other than English. Despite being performed in Welsh (an indigenous British language), the speaker’s language signifies his and his linguistic community’s marginalisation within the UK. Delivered by the character of a Welsh farmer (performed by Steffan Rhodri), the speaker outlines his reasons for voting to leave the EU. For the farmer, the threat to his cultural and linguistic heritage, and his livelihood stems not from outside the UK’s borders (as much of the rhetoric of the Leave campaigns claimed) but from within. In the monologue, this threat is embodied for the farmer in the form of ‘[a] woman from London’ who has ‘sold her flat in Clapham’ and bought the speaker’s grandmother’s cottage (Owen, 2017). Despite the woman’s commercialisation of this local cottage, the speaker describes how she has refused to integrate into the community or support the farmers’ local co-op, the farmer regarding her choice to eliminate the Welsh name of her property as a palpable signifier of her rejection of the local community. Indeed, the farmer uses his language to define himself in opposition to this woman from London, and effectively positions her as an outsider to his community through his use of English phrases to refer to her business. Throughout the monologue, the English language is deployed as a term of derogation, not only to refer to the woman from London but to English metropolitan areas in general. In this way Owen inverts the dichotomising anti-immigration narrative that was circulated during the Referendum campaigns. After all, it is the English language and culture that the farmer claims is threatening to decimate this Welsh community, a threat embodied in the migrant woman from London who is unwilling to support the local communities from whom she benefits financially (Owen, 2017).

All three of these monologues disorientate the viewer by undermining their expectations about the specific identity each individual speaker should conform to and the position they should occupy by virtue of their dress, accent, language, and religio-political background. This disorientation is fostered by the monologue form that each contribution to the series takes, confining the viewer to the speaker’s perspective without any interlocutor to contradict or comment on the speaker’s assertions or claims. The world of the monologue is calibrated primarily according to the speaker’s words rather than the words that others have used and continue to use to map the speaker and fix their identity. Instead, the viewer depends almost solely on the speaker to provide a context within which their character can be located. At the same time, the geographical backdrop against which each of these monologues is delivered suggests the importance of these locations and landscapes in the lives of the speakers. While the monologues attempt to challenge the reduction of the speakers’ identities to absolute geographical and socio-political labels, they also demonstrate how the environments identified by these labels have shaped the speakers’ identities. These labels, therefore, are not necessarily regarded by the speakers themselves (as they are perhaps by others) as derogatory appellations. Butler observes this double-edged aspect of interpellation: ‘[c]one comes to ‘exist’ by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other. One ‘exists’ not only by virtue of being recognized but in a prior sense, by being recognizable’ (1997, p.5, italics in original).

These three monologues explore this tension between the speakers’ frustration with how these labels or terms of address are used to fix their identity and their desire to affirm their identity via these same terms.
Gary Owen’s Welsh farmer vacillates between English and Welsh, demonstrating that his use of Welsh to communicate with the viewer is not due to an inability to speak English but rather results from a conscious choice to use and preserve his native language in spite of the economic benefits that could result from his adoption of English. His language not only erects a barrier between himself and the English-speakers of the play (the woman from London) but also with the viewer of the monologue. The subtitles translating the monologue demonstrate the Welsh language’s relative marginality as well as Headlong Theatre and The Guardian’s assumption that this indigenous language will not be understood by the majority of its viewers (The Pines, 2017). Kennedy’s Chummy also demonstrates his unwillingness to forfeit the labels that his accent and presentation to the viewer imply, in spite of these labels arguably excluding him from employment opportunities and certain social networks. Despite his Scottish, Glaswegian, working-class identity being used to categorize him and effectively exclude him from certain social spheres and politically empowered positions, Chummy consciously refuses to modify his behaviour or identity in order to satisfy the narrow parameters that would afford him easier access to these positions. At one point, Chummy perfectly mimics a Received Pronunciation English accent, partly to mock the superficiality of this accent as a signifier of a particular type of person, but also to highlight the fact that he could mimic this speech if he chose to. He simply chooses not to adopt this speech and this choice (like Owen’s speaker) not only presents an obstacle between himself and those who act as gatekeepers to specific social, cultural, and political arenas but between Chummy and the audience as well. Throughout the monologue, Chummy’s colloquialisms are never translated for the viewer, thereby alienating the majority of viewers (particularly non-Scottish viewers) from the content of his monologue (Permanent Sunshine, 2017). In Kennedy’s and Owen’s monologues, therefore, it is the majority of these monologues’ viewers who become the excluded subjects.

Gregg’s monologue, in contrast, presents the viewer with the possibility that barriers can be dismantled rather than set up. While her partner is applying for an Irish passport, the monologue’s speaker argues that he is not doing so at the expense of his Northern Irish and British identity. For the speaker, these two identities are no longer mutually exclusive (as her father considers them) but can coexist. The speaker of Gregg’s monologue refers to three generations of her family to demonstrate this radical transformation in Northern Irish society. Indeed, the speaker is attempting to dismantle the very boundaries that her father worked to preserve. She describes to the viewer how the European Union has been instrumental in establishing and supporting cross-community initiatives that have allowed her to work towards this goal. Her flexibility with regard to her own identity and that of her partner’s reflects the potential malleability of these physical and psychic boundaries that have until recently presented immovable barriers between communities in Northern Ireland.

At one point in the monologue, Gregg’s speaker attempts to demonstrate this flexibility by mimicking an Irish accent. However, unlike Chummy, her attempt almost completely fails. ‘Tap a’ the marnin to ya begorra begorra!’ she jokes. This hackneyed citation of Irishness reveals her inability to fully or convincingly adopt this identity (at least at the present time) and instead reveals the liminal position that this particular woman appears to occupy in Northern Ireland as a working-class Protestant woman, no longer fixed to the unyielding British identity to which her father clings so tightly but also not able to embody or embrace an Irish identity either (at least beyond parody). The presence of a third generation in the form of her son, however, suggests a future where these identities might not be so intractable and that what it means to be interpellated as a Protestant, Catholic, or Northern Irish is being changed through these reinscriptions (such as Gregg’s monologue) of what these identities actually signify (Your Ma’s a Hard Brexit, 2017).

In fact, all three of these monologues present themselves as examples of such reinscriptions, demonstrating the disjuncture between the labels they have been ascribed by others and the reality that these labels (or what these labels have come to mean) obscure. Not only do the speakers of these monologues not conform to the stereotypical ‘Brexit’ or ‘Remain’, they also disrupt the fixedness and homogeneity of the identities that their national, social, linguistic, and religio-political labels imply. As Butler points out: ‘[I]nterpellation is an address that regularly misses its mark’ (1997, p.33). These three monologues confront the audience with the trauma of this linguistic vulnerability, that regardless of how one presents oneself to the Other, how one is received is never fully within one’s control. The address ‘regularly misses its mark’, yet in spite of this misfire, contributes to the ‘sedimentation of its usages’ (p.36) that come to constitute what these labels or terms of address signify.

‘Chaos. Is. The Point’ (Graham, 2017).

While the three monologues examined above demonstrate how the subject is constituted in the
language others use to address them, Butler points out that language is also something the subject does:

> We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing we do. Language is a name for our doing: both 'what' we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences.

(1997, p.8)

Just as the previous three monologues explore the linguistic vulnerability of the subject to address, Butler points out that all language is subject to this vulnerability of ‘miss[ing] its mark’, that is, the ‘disjunction between utterance and meaning’ that can produce effects ‘that [the speaking subject] does not intend’ (1997, p.87). Citing Shoshana Felman, Butler observes that speech ‘says more, or says differently, than it means to say’ (1997, p.10). For the speakers of these monologues, therefore, while their characters are constructed through their own words, these words may create or convey meanings that they might not necessarily intend or even be conscious of having communicated. From the casting of a vote to a slogan on a T-shirt and the virtual utterances of internet trolls, the monologues of James Graham, Meera Syal, and Maxine Peake, in particular, address the speakers’ recognition of this ‘limit to sovereignty’ (Butler, 1997, p.41) over their speech, the trauma of this recognition, and the responsibility they bear for the occasionally destructive consequences of this ‘limit’ for themselves and for others.

Graham’s monologue *Burn* focuses on the character of an internet troll called Carol (played by Joanna Scanlon) who engages in actively and enthusiastically goading individuals from both sides of the political spectrum (from ‘proper fundamentalist Remoaner[s]’ to ‘the ‘kippers’ and former BNP members’) into online confrontations (2017). Although the monologue is set in Nottinghamshire, Hodge’s direction emphasises Carol’s dislocation from her geographical and physical surroundings by presenting her sitting at a computer in her living room with the curtains shut to block out the daylight. For Carol, who works nights, the internet provides her with a social space that can accommodate her demanding schedule. However, the identity Carol performs in this space differs radically from the one she presents to others in the more tangible world of ‘real-life’ interactions. Indeed, while Carol directs the majority of her monologue at the viewer, she also performs a simultaneous (albeit unheard) dialogue with others via her online interactions. Carol’s identity, therefore, is fragmented through the varied comments she expresses in her online and offline environments, a fragmentation underlined by the various devices she employs to perform her online selves, repeatedly switching from her desktop computer to her Android phone to facilitate her communications (*Burn*, 2017).

Like Carol, the speaker of Syal’s monologue *Just A T-Shirt* curates her utterances in order to present a particular version of herself to the addressee of her monologue. This monologue, which is delivered by Priti, ‘a middle-aged British born Indian woman’ (performed by Meera Syal), is directed at a police officer, who remains unseen and from whose perspective the viewer sees the character. Set in a non-descript police interview room, Priti’s monologue is presented in the form of a police statement describing an attack to which she and her neighbour were both victim (*Just a T-Shirt*, 2017). As her monologue progresses, however, Priti begins to deploy similar anti-immigration rhetoric to that which was circulated during the EU Referendum. Although she acknowledges that as immigrants her parents were forced to work ‘twice as hard and for half the money of the English people’, she also argues that ‘at least there were jobs’ and blames this shortage on the recent influx of refugees to the UK, who she also ironically claims are nothing more than ‘benefits scroungers’. In contrast to these ‘bad immigrants’, she argues that her family ‘has never drawn one penny from this country’ (*Syal*, 2017). Syal uses the monologue form, therefore, to reveal the irony of Priti’s invocation of the same ‘immigrant threat’ that was used to discriminate and demonise her parents’ generation of immigrants. As the monologue eventually reveals, Priti herself is a contributor (albeit unconsciously) to the anti-immigration discourse that has emboldened her attacker, the monologic presentation of Priti’s speech allowing Syal to demonstrate this self-reflexivity that defines Priti’s narrative.

In contrast to Priti, Carol deploys her online utterances knowingly to provoke negative reactions from their various addressees. For Carol, this involves putting liberal Remainers ‘on the radar’ of the ‘most frothy-mouthed Leavers’. When she alerts the online persona of Luke Morris, a former BNP member, who she describes as a ‘nasty piece of work’, to the existence of the Remain-voting @ GreenGenie, however, her online actions have real-world consequences. Carol explains to the viewer that she has been actively spurring Morris on to engage in belligerent and antagonistic discourses online. Indeed, her description of Morris as her ‘long-term project’ summons up the image of online grooming, a practice not only associated with sexual predation but also ideological predation by terrorist groups’ targeting potential recruits online. The language used by Carol to describe Morris’ potential strengthens the association with this latter group (*Graham*, 2017).
‘He’ll lob a couple of grenades into this [debate], get it going,’ she says, ‘I just know Luke is going to go off any second – easy’. She describes herself as a ‘warrior who’s been waiting for a war’, and refers to her computer as a ‘weapon’, jokingly mimicking gunfire as she sends messages with the click of her mouse. Her figurative use of the language of violence, war, and terror to describe her online utterances foreshadows its literal manifestation at the monologue’s conclusion. Carol’s online messages have been reduced to an instrument of discord, their truth-content of secondary importance to their efficacy in prompting and contributing to this discord. She presents herself as a facilitator or agent of ‘chaos’, orchestrating online encounters between individuals with polarised views in order to agitate these individuals and attributes her vote to leave the EU to the fulfilment of this mission (Graham, 2017).

The speaker of Maxine Peake’s monologue Shattered is on the frontline in the battle to counter the destructive consequences of this so-called ‘chaos’ created by individuals such as Carol. Set in the ‘unassuming building’ of the Greater Manchester Law Centre, Peake’s monologue is delivered by the character of Dalir (performed by Nasser Memarzia), an immigration lawyer who works at the centre. Dalir’s first lines express the seemingly insurmountable task confronting the centre. ‘Where do I start?’ he sighs, before providing a brief summary of one of the cases he is involved in, concerning ‘a young woman from Pakistan’ who was unable to secure a visa from the Home Office to stay in the UK despite being at risk of serious harm if she was deported to Pakistan. In spite of this danger, Dalir explains that her case was lost because ‘the Home Office won’t believe the Home Office to stay in the UK despite being at risk of serious harm if she was deported to Pakistan’ (Peake, 2017).

In contrast to Carol, Dalir uses his rhetorical skill to defend individuals who have been subject to racially motivated attacks and discriminatory practices but do not have the legal protections afforded to British citizens. Dalir can be seen as a mirror-image of Carol, a ‘warrior’-like figure on the front-line of what he regards as Brexit-related violence against immigrants. Like Carol, he uses language and words (specifically the law) to affect change in the real world and in the lives of individuals. Where Carol’s provocative language results in acts of discord and ultimately violence, Dalir’s words are instruments of preservation, his clients employing his rhetorical skill to ensure their literal survival. In contrast to Carol, Dalir is painfully aware of the high-stakes real-world implications that his words can wield. Identifying the EU Referendum as an instigating event for the rise in hate-speech and hate-crimes targeting immigrant communities in the UK, Dalir suggests that these attacks are further aggravated by people’s unwillingness to question the anti-immigration rhetoric of the various campaign groups involved in the referendum. A connection is established, therefore, between the so-called online echo-chambers populated by internet trolls like Carol, the voters who were seduced by this anti-immigration rhetoric like Priti, and the real-world consequences that result from contributions to these discourses.

Indeed, the minimal references to the speakers’ geographical locations and the non-descriptive settings of each monologue (in contrast to the first three discussed in this article) suggest that the virtual and real-world trenches of these battles can potentially open up in any location. Even when the subject who contributes to these discourses is not in close proximity to the recipients of their speech, this distance does not necessarily mitigate the consequences of this speech for this recipient. While Carol never leaves her home and never physically engages the individuals she interacts with on the internet, her inflammatory online utterances nevertheless prompt Luke Morris to commit an act of physical violence on @GreenGenie (who we discover is a Polish woman). Furthermore, while Carol (somewhat naively) does not intend for her words to prompt Morris to engage in anything more than an online verbal assault, Graham demonstrates the ‘limit of intentionality’ (Butler, 1997, p.10) that prevents her from exerting such control over her speech’s reception.

Syal’s monologue, however, provides the most extreme example of this ‘limit of intentionality’. Priti’s anti-immigration rhetoric resulting in consequences she not only did not intend but perhaps never even envisaged as possible. She tells the police officers that while she was talking to her Polish neighbour Pavel, her attacker spat at her and delivered a racist slur intended to denigrate her ethnic heritage. The attacker’s targeting of Priti (a British-born woman) as the outsider reveals the deeply-rooted racist foundation of the attacker’s nationalist ideology and exposes the irony of his greater identification with a first generation economic immigrant simply by virtue of his whiteness than with a fellow compatriot as a result of her ethnic heritage. In fact, his racist abuse reconstitutes her position within British society, repositioning her as an outsider in her own homeland. Syal suggests that the Brexit vote (to which Priti contributed) has unintentionally emboldened the far right and legitimized their ideology, an ideology whose parameters of Britishness exclude even its own citizens, such as Priti. This link between Brexit and these acts of violence perpetrated against immigrants is made explicit in the message emblazoned across Priti’s attacker’s T-shirt: ‘YES WE WON! NOW SEND THEM ALL BACK!’ (Syal, 2017).

Peake’s monologue demonstrates, however, that
this ‘disjuncture between utterance and meaning’ also allows for the possibility that these speech acts might not necessarily have destructive or injurious consequences even if this was the speaker’s intention. While Dalir observes that the legal rules and regulations that determine a refugee’s right to asylum in Britain have never been so ‘cruel’ or ‘vindictive’ in the thirty years of his career, he also argues that the Brexit vote has galvanised people to work together to resist and contest these legal frameworks. Indeed, the discord depicted in Graham’s monologue finds its inversion in the concluding moments of Peake’s monologue with the appearance of the Women Asylum Seekers Together (WAST) choir. The euphony of their voices in song as they stand together provides a stark counterpoint to the voiceless cacophony of conflicting opinions and divisive rhetoric circulated in the online sphere (Shattered, 2017). This group of people acting in unity to counter intolerance contrasts with Carol’s isolated yet fragmentary address ironically prompted by an anti-immigration discourse to which she has herself contributed. She has been forced to view herself as both addressor and addressee of such speech, a self-reflexivity that the monologue form is particularly effective at conveying. However, Priti’s monologue itself can be seen as a response to her vote to leave the EU being co-opted by far-right nationalist groups, her account of the attack becoming literally inscribed into the official record as a police statement. By signing the statement, her experience can be used to express her opposition to the acts of violence carried out under the banner of her vote and reclaim her citizenship from those who would seek to seize it.

In contrast, while Carol clearly did not intend for her inflammatory words to exert physically violent consequences on individuals in the ‘real’ world, she nevertheless actively contributed to a discourse that purposefully dichotomises individuals according to their political preferences, homogenizes them according to these categories, and agitates individuals on the extremes of this political spectrum. The online social media platforms of Facebook and Twitter provide a fertile environment for these discourses’ rapid circulation, the frequency and potentially global scale of their ‘reiterative operation’ (Butler, 1997, p.34) facilitating the swift ‘sedimentation’ of these injurious discourses, ‘a repetition that congeals’ and ‘gives the name its force’ (p.36). The volume or scale of this ‘sedimentation’ arguably lends a veneer of legitimacy to such discourses by giving other users of these online platforms an inflated impression of these discourses’ prevalence and popularity. Therefore, while this loss of or ‘limit to sovereignty’ might appear to suggest a loss of agency or accountability on the part of the speaker, Butler observes that ‘agency begins where sovereignty wanes. The one who acts […] acts precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as an actor and hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset’ (p.16). Carol’s contribution to these online ‘echo-chambers’, in spite of the fact that she does not sincerely believe the sentiments she is espousing, implicate her in this sedimentation, her contributions inflating support for divisive ideological movements and increasing the gulf between various socio-political positions.

‘52% of the country can’t all be scum, they can’t all be idiots, racists, or xenophobes’ (James, 2017).

It is the distress caused by this ‘sedimentation of […] usages’, which gives the appellations Leave and Remain their ‘force’, that is explored in the final three monologues of the series written by Charlene James, David Hare, and Abi Morgan. All three of these monologues examine the trauma experienced by the speaker when their voting preference is used to map their socio-political identity. As Butler argues, ‘[t]he name has […] a historicity, what might be understood as the history which has become internal to a name, has come to constitute the contemporary meaning of a name’, a historicity that is sedimented through its iteration (1997, p.36). The terms Leave and Remain, by virtue of their accelerated circulation and iteration via online social media platforms allowed this sedimentation to become entrenched rapidly, each term becoming reified into an indicator of voters’ broader socio-political positions. As these monologues all demonstrate, ‘such terms carry connotations that exceed the purposes for which they may be intended’ (p.38). Each speaker in the following three monologues is forced to confront this ‘excess’, which has come to (re)constitute their identity overnight by virtue of their voting preference.

In the case of Charlene James’ monologue Go Home, the speaker discusses the trauma of being interpellated as xenophobic and close-minded by virtue of voting to leave the EU, an experience used to reflect the broader divisions and tensions between England’s metropolitan and regional constituents after the Brexit vote. Set in a train station in Wigan, James’ monologue is delivered by Reece (played by Dean Fagan), a 20-year-old student as he waits for his girlfriend Hannah to arrive by train from London (Go Home, 2017). As he awaits her arrival, Reece describes how he and Hannah met at university in London where he became friends with people ‘from all different walks of life’ (James, 2017). The day after the referendum result, however, Reece encounters
first-hand the polarised reactions that were being expressed throughout the UK. He receives two text messages, ‘[o]ne from [his] dad that simply says: BREXIT!!!’ and ‘one from Hannah’ that contains ‘no words. Just emojis. A torn Union Jack. A sad face. A crying face. An angry face. A little pile of poo with a face’. James uses the reactions of Remain voters like Hannah and her friends to Leave voters like Reece’s father to expose the gulf that has opened up between those living in metropolitan and regional areas. Their demonising of the voters ‘up north’ (like Reece’s father) and their references to these areas as ‘idiot-town[s]’ and their constituents as ‘scum’ reveals an intolerance that Reece (somewhat generously) ascribes to their unfamiliarity and remoteness (both geographically and socially) from these regions.

Reece attempts to bridge this gulf by explaining that for communities ‘up north’ who feel forgotten and ignored by the Westminster politicians and so-called metropolitan elites, the Brexit vote was an opportunity to confront this political establishment with the reality of their existence.

Reece’s appeal, however, is met with intransigence from Hannah’s friends, who he recalls merely invoked ‘their twittergram phrases about being right’. James suggests that meaningful dialogue is impossible if people are unwilling to venture outside the ‘echo chambers’ that recirculate opinions they already agree with (James, 2017). Indeed, as Graham’s monologue demonstrates these closed networks of communication have the potential to impede communication altogether by inflating the dichotomisation between various socio-political positions and consequently obstruct dialogue between individuals with differing views. The monologue is a particularly effective theatrical form to explore this socio-political isolation and alienation that occurred during and after the Brexit vote. Not only does the limited perspective of the monologue’s speaker convey their subjective experiences and the opinions formed as a result of these experiences (as well as the opinions that shape their reception or interpretation of these experiences), but the monologue also allows the viewer to witness the struggles encountered by individuals as they attempt to negotiate one another’s subjectivities. As Reece discovers this struggle is sometimes greatest with those we consider closest to us.

When Reece informs Hannah that he voted for Brexit, his admission triggers a complete breakdown of communication between them. Hannah cannot reconcile her boyfriend with her perception of Leave voters, who are defined by and for her as xenophobic, reckless, and idiotic. By divulging this information, Reece has effectively been re-mapped for Hannah according to these Brexiteer co-ordinates. ‘I didn’t hear from her for a week’, Reece recalls. ‘I sent her messages, no words, just emojis. Face blowing kisses, the flamenco woman dancing, smiley face, heart, heart, broken heart’ (James, 2017). Reece’s use of emojis rather than words mirrors Hannah’s reaction to Brexit, his trauma at being interpellated as a Brexiteer reflecting her distressed reaction at the referendum result. In fact, Reece’s use of emojis conveys his frustration with language, in particular its failure to represent him to his girlfriend as something other than a bigot. His use of emojis that eschew a clear meaning (i.e. its ‘historicity’ is less unified) in the context of his text (e.g. the flamenco woman dancing) allows Reece to draw on a pictorial vocabulary not as trenchantly bound to the ‘sedimentation of [its] usages’ as the highly-charged terms of the EU Referendum. Hannah’s arrival during the concluding moments of the monologue suggests that this new lexicon has successfully bridged the gap between them, not in spite of its ambiguity but because of it.

While James’ monologue ends on a hopeful and reconciliatory note, David Hare’s monologue Time To Leave is less optimistic (2017). For Hare, the possibility of reconciling voters on both sides of the EU Referendum divide is unlikely since most voters are not aware themselves or unable to recognise exactly why they voted one way or another. Set in the Home Counties, the monologue is delivered by a ‘well-spoken’ upper-middle class woman called Eleanor Shaw (played by Kristin Scott-Thomas) who discusses her reasons for voting to leave the EU. While Eleanor repeatedly denies that her decision to vote Leave was influenced by campaign rhetoric, she also struggles to articulate exactly what prompted her decision. Declaring that she is ‘not an idiot’, Eleanor claims that she was not persuaded by the jingoist sloganeering of the Leave campaigns (Hare, 2017). In fact, she repeatedly asserts that this was not a determining factor in her decision almost as if she fears being cast in the same mould as what has become ‘sedimented’ and homogenized in the popular imagination as the stereotypical Leave voter – xenophobic, working-class, regional constituent. Unlike these voters, Eleanor maintains that ‘[w]hen they told me I’d get my country back, I knew it wasn’t true’ (Hare, 2017).

However, Hare suggests that Eleanor is simply unable to recognise the similarities between herself and those she perceives as these ‘other’ Leave voters who she is attempting to distance herself from. Beneath the veneer of her middle-class sensibilities, Hare implies that Eleanor harbours and is motivated by precisely the xenophobic impulses she simultaneously disclaims. As Butler observes, ‘one may well imagine oneself in ways that are quite contrary of how one is socially constituted […]’ For the measure of that constitution is not to be found in a reflexive...
appropriation of that constitution, but, rather, in a chain of signification that exceeds the circuit of self-knowledge’ (1997, p.31). The language Eleanor employs in her monologue suggests such self-(mis)recognition. So unconscious is she of her own biases that she unintentionally reveals them to the viewer herself. She argues that the EU’s failure stems from the lawless and lackadaisical Mediterranean countries, rather than the ‘thriftty, hard-working’ northern European countries, and frequently deploys language inflected with xenophobia (Hare, 2017). For Eleanor, Europe is embodied in the cheap immigrant labour she hires to do handiwork around her property.

The monologue form is particularly effective in demonstrating Eleanor’s lack of self-reflection. She is unable to recognise the personal experiences and biases that have prompted her decision to leave the EU and as a result is unable to articulate what she had envisaged as the desired consequence of her vote. ‘I don’t understand why it hasn’t worked’, Eleanor says, ‘I don’t understand why I don’t feel better’ (Hare, 2017).

In a moment of clarity, Eleanor suggests that she and her fellow Leave voters might have been motivated by anger and frustration at their own government as much as anything else. As Patrice Pavis observes, ‘the ‘monologue’ is an internalized dialogue, formulated in ‘inner language’, between a speaking I and a listening I’ (1998, p.218). Hare’s use of the form reveals how this ‘internalized dialogue’ of the speaker is, nevertheless, still subject to the same ‘disjuncture of meaning and utterance’ that afflicts all speech (Butler, 1997, p.87).

As both addressor and addressee (in addition to the viewer) of the monologue, Eleanor constantly ‘misses the mark’ and her speech reveals her xenophobia even as she repeatedly refutes it. As James’ and Hare’s monologues demonstrate, constituents voted for a variety of (conscious and unconscious) reasons to leave the EU. In the aftermath of this decision, however, these diverse and multifarious reasons must be reconciled into a single unified action. In spite of the dichotomisation between Leave and Remain voters, the majority decision to leave the EU ironically disguises a lack of consensus even within this majority, a problematic reality that has been exposed by the UK’s continued struggle to determine what exactly Brexit means.

While the speakers of Hare’s and James’ monologues struggle with and attempt to refute their own interpellation as Brexiteers, Abi Morgan’s monologue The End confronts the viewer with the UK’s own vulnerability to address. In Morgan’s contribution to the series, the breakdown of the relationship between a husband and wife is used as an allegory for the post-Brexit relationship between Britain and Europe respectively (2017). Delivered by the wife, Helen (played by Penelope Wilton), the monologue conveys the personal shock and trauma she feels in response to her husband’s abrupt departure from their marriage. Helen, therefore, becomes an allegorical conduit for the EU’s perspective on the UK’s decision to leave the EU.

Looking back on their marital history, Helen recalls that while their marriage might not have been perfect, she and her husband had ‘built a good life together’ and had ‘compromise[d]’ and ‘[t]hrough things out’ to sustain their relationship (Morgan, 2017). In Morgan’s monologue and Jeremy Herrin’s direction, the figure of Helen’s husband is notably absent, only existing in the background noise of a TV, or in objects around the house, such as his wedding ring discarded on a shelf in the couple’s bedroom (The End, 2017). His absence becomes a void that is filled solely with Helen’s words, which cast him as feckless and driven by self-interest. In response to her husband’s assertion that Helen and himself are now free ‘[t]o spend [their] money as [they] choose. To live as they choose’, Helen retorts that he is now also free ‘[t]o screw as [he] choose[s]’ (Morgan, 2017). In Morgan’s allegory, Britain is constituted as similarly reckless, free to pursue possibly destructive policies without oversight from a partner.

In this case, the monologue form allows Morgan to demonstrate how the UK is also vulnerable to this interpellation from the ‘other’ regardless of whether it is conscious of this interpellation or not. Butler argues that ‘one’s social constitution takes place without one’s knowing’ and ‘the name wields a linguistic power of constitution in ways that are indifferent to the one who bears the name’ (1997, p.31). As Helen reflects, ‘[t]here is no coming back from this. Once you’re out. You’re out’ (Morgan 2017). Just as the EU became a site onto which many voters projected their anger, dissatisfaction, and frustration, so too can Britain become such a site for the EU—a dichotomisation that belies the internal fractures and contradictions occurring not only at a national and regional level, but within the individual voter also. Indeed, Butler warns that ‘one may, as it were, meet that socially constituted self by surprise, with alarm or pleasure, even with shock’ (1997, p.31). Perhaps it is only by gazing into this linguistic mirror of the ‘other’ that our mutual (individual and collective) subjectivities can ever be negotiated.

By engaging the viewer directly, the monologue form proffers itself as a potentially productive looking glass to achieve this goal. As Pavis points out, because the monologue ‘does not depend structurally on a reply from an interlocutor’, the form ‘establishes a direct relationship between the speaker and the “it” of the world of which he speaks’ (1998, p.219). Wiegand explained that this immediacy and direct address was particularly important for the series.
since they were not performed live on a stage but were recorded and published online. For Wiegand, this ‘direct communication’ that was enabled by the straight-to-camera address was ‘vital’ (Wiegand, 2017). Furthermore, this direct address positioned the audience as the addressee of these characters’ speeches. As Pavis argues, by ‘address[ing] the spectators as an accomplice and a watcher-hearer’, the monologue potentially ‘communicates directly with all of society’ (1998, p.219). In a context in which ‘[w]e find ourselves living through an insurgency of the unheard’ (Coleman, 2017, p.118), the monologue form offers a medium that can perhaps foster dialogue by forcing the addressee to listen first and foremost.

Nevertheless, the responses to the monologues by some online and media commentators demonstrate the difficulty of ‘undoing […] this process of discursive constitution’ (Butler, 1997, p.19). For example, Toby Young writing in The Spectator dismissed most of the series as Remain ‘agit-prop’ and accused the playwrights of ‘having swallowed project fear’ (Young, 2017). Young’s response, however, contains several factual errors, the most egregious being his identification of only one Leave voter among the nine monologues in spite of the majority of speakers (5 out of the 9) in the series depicting Leave voters. While Young’s engagement with the series does not seem to lose oneself precisely there where one is sought’ (Coleman, 2017, p.30).

...in contrast to the certainty promised by this ‘final vocabulary’: they know what things mean, and anyone who disagrees with them is implicated in a betrayal of moral certitude’ (Coleman, 2017, p.111). Perhaps what these monologues most acutely expose is the somewhat disquieting reality that the British public has been forced to confront in these intervening years, that in contrast to the certainty promised by this ‘final vocabulary’, what one actually discovers is that ‘[t]he letter, inscribed or propounded speech, is always stolen. Always stolen because it is always open. It never belongs to its author or to its addressee, and by nature, it never follows the trajectory that leads from subject to subject’ (2005, p.224, italics in original). By re-presenting the ‘purloined’ voices of the EU Referendum, these monologues allow each of their speakers to at least partly dispel the ‘ether of speech’ within which they have been and continue to be obscured (p.221). As Coleman asserts, “[p]opulists adopt what the philosopher Richard Rorty calls a “final vocabulary”: they know what things mean, and anyone who disagrees with them is implicated in a betrayal of moral certitude” (Coleman, 2017, p.111). Perhaps what these monologues most acutely expose is the somewhat disquieting reality that the British public has been forced to confront in these intervening years, that in contrast to the certainty promised by this ‘final vocabulary’, what one actually discovers is that ‘[t]he letter, inscribed or propounded speech, is always stolen. Always stolen because it is always open. It never belongs to its author or to its addressee, and by nature, it never follows the trajectory that leads from subject to subject’ (2005, p.224, italics in original). By re-presenting the ‘purloined’ voices of the EU Referendum, these monologues allow each of their speakers to at least partly dispel the ‘ether of speech’ within which they have been and continue to be obscured (p.221). As Coleman asserts, “[p]opulists adopt what the philosopher Richard Rorty calls a “final vocabulary”: they know what things mean, and anyone who disagrees with them is implicated in a betrayal of moral certitude” (Coleman, 2017, p.111). Perhaps what these monologues most acutely expose is the somewhat disquieting reality that the British public has been forced to confront in these intervening years, that in contrast to the certainty promised by this ‘final vocabulary’, what one actually discovers is that ‘[t]he letter, inscribed or propounded speech, is always stolen. Always stolen because it is always open. It never belongs to its author or to its addressee, and by nature, it never follows the trajectory that leads from subject to subject’ (2005, p.224, italics in original).

Conclusion

In 2016, Dimbleby claimed that the British people had spoken. Four years later, however, the United Kingdom is still struggling to determine exactly what was said. While the Brexit Shorts series was inevitably criticised for variously presenting a reductive image of Leave and Remain voters, for conveying the biases of their playwrights (and indeed The Guardian newspaper), and for excluding certain perspectives from the series (e.g., over-65s), their monologue form nevertheless allowed viewers to see how we are all subject to the ‘vulnerability to being named’ (Butler, 1997, p.30) regardless of our political affiliations or whether we agree with or choose to affirm these identities or not. The series demonstrates how the monologue form can provide a particularly effective medium to undermine and re-signify the reductive appellations that were used to constitute voters’ identities during and after the EU Referendum. Each monologue challenges the viewers’ preconceptions of the speakers’ identities, exposing the reality that not only are individual voters often motivated by conflicting and occasionally contradictory socio-political positions (themselves to greater or lesser degrees shaped by personal experiences and emotions) but that these positions are not static, fixed, or even always consciously occupied by the subject.

Jacques Derrida argues that ‘[t]he letter, inscribed or propounded speech, is always stolen. Always stolen because it is always open. It never belongs to its author or to its addressee, and by nature, it never follows the trajectory that leads from subject to subject’ (2005, p.224, italics in original). By re-presenting the ‘purloined’ voices of the EU Referendum, these monologues allow each of their speakers to at least partly dispel the ‘ether of speech’ within which they have been and continue to be obscured (p.221). As Coleman asserts, “[p]opulists adopt what the philosopher Richard Rorty calls a “final vocabulary”: they know what things mean, and anyone who disagrees with them is implicated in a betrayal of moral certitude” (Coleman, 2017, p.111). Perhaps what these monologues most acutely expose is the somewhat disquieting reality that the British public has been forced to confront in these intervening years, that in contrast to the certainty promised by this ‘final vocabulary’, what one actually discovers is that ‘[t]he letter, inscribed or propounded speech, is always stolen. Always stolen because it is always open. It never belongs to its author or to its addressee, and by nature, it never follows the trajectory that leads from subject to subject’ (2005, p.224, italics in original). By re-presenting the ‘purloined’ voices of the EU Referendum, these monologues allow each of their speakers to at least partly dispel the ‘ether of speech’ within which they have been and continue to be obscured (p.221). As Coleman asserts, “[p]opulists adopt what the philosopher Richard Rorty calls a “final vocabulary”: they know what things mean, and anyone who disagrees with them is implicated in a betrayal of moral certitude” (Coleman, 2017, p.111). Perhaps what these monologues most acutely expose is the somewhat disquieting reality that the British public has been forced to confront in these intervening years, that in contrast to the certainty promised by this ‘final vocabulary’, what one actually discovers is that ‘[t]he letter, inscribed or propounded speech, is always stolen. Always stolen because it is always open. It never belongs to its author or to its addressee, and by nature, it never follows the trajectory that leads from subject to subject’ (2005, p.224, italics in original).
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