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Black Lives, Black Words:
Transnational Solidarity and Collective Artistic Activism

PAOLA PRIETO LÓPEZ

Universidad de Oviedo

prietopaola@uniovi.es

In 2015, playwright Reginald Edmund started the *Black Lives, Black Words* international project in Chicago with a series of performances responding to the Black Lives Matter movement. *Black Lives, Black Words* aims at exploring Afrodiasporic experiences in multicultural cities such as Chicago and London, drawing on the lives of local communities but aiming to become a catalyst for change worldwide, while at the same time transferring the discussion to the theatre in order to empower unheard voices in the artistic field. This article analyses three short plays that were performed at the reopening of the Bush Theatre in London in March 2017: *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland*, by Mojisola Adebayo, *The Principles of Cartography*, by Winsome Pinnock, and *My White Best Friend*, by Rachel De-lahay. By examining the three thematic and aesthetic axes of these plays, namely, amplification and choral performance, cartographies of struggle and white solidarity, I establish a parallel between the theatre productions and the Black Lives Matter movement, from which the project draws inspiration. At the same time, I argue for their potential to forge solidarity networks transnationally by dealing with social and political issues affecting Black communities across the US and the UK.

Keywords: solidarity; theatre; Black Lives Matter; *Black Lives, Black Words*; transnational; feminism

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Black Lives, Black Words:
Solidaridad transnacional y activismo artístico colectivo

En 2015, el dramaturgo Reginald Edmund inició el proyecto internacional *Black Lives, Black Words* en Chicago con una serie de representaciones que respondían al movimiento Black Lives Matter. *Black Lives, Black Words* tiene como objetivo explorar experiencias afrodiaspóricas en ciudades multiculturales como Chicago o Londres, inspirándose en las vidas de las comunidades locales, pero con el objetivo de convertirse en un catalizador para el cambio en todo el mundo, al mismo tiempo que se transfiere la discusión al teatro para potenciar las voces no escuchadas en el campo artístico. Este artículo analiza tres obras breves puestas en escena en la reapertura del Bush Theatre en Londres en marzo de 2017: *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland*, de Mojisola Adebayo, *The Principles of Cartography*, de Winsome Pinnock, y *My White Best Friend*, de Rachel De-lahay. Al examinar los tres ejes temáticos y estéticos de estas obras, a saber, amplificación y representación coral, cartografías de lucha y solidaridad blanca, establezco un paralelismo entre las obras y el movimiento Black Lives Matter que inspira el proyecto teatral. Al mismo tiempo, argumento su potencial para forjar redes de solidaridad transnacional al tratar temas sociales y políticos que afectan a las comunidades negras en los Estados Unidos y el Reino Unido.

Palabras clave: solidaridad; teatro; Black Lives Matter; *Black Lives, Black Words*; transnacional; feminismo

I. THE ROOTS OF A MOVEMENT: FROM CIVIL RIGHTS TO BLACK LIVES MATTER

Originally founded by Pattrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi in the US, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was created in response to the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of police officer George Zimmerman in 2013 for his murder. From its inception, BLM has been defined as a feminist movement because of, as Marcia Chatelain maintains, “its interrogation of state power and its critique of structural inequality” (2015, 57), which positions Black cis women, Black queer and Black trans people at the forefront of the movement. The connections between the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s in the US and the BLM movement have been examined in a number of studies (Jackson 2016; Clayton 2018). But while BLM does draw on Black freedom struggle movements of the past in its fight against the systemic marginalisation and oppression of Black people, it is innovative in disrupting traditional stereotypical definitions of social activism, leadership and state violence, making a dual commitment to radical intersectionality and participatory democracy. In this regard, Black women, who had been major organisers within social movements in the past, are central to the movement for the first time. This contrasts with how civil rights movements tended to be organised around a single Black male charismatic leader (Davis 2016, 86). Apart from foregrounding the role of Black women as activists and leaders, BLM has also been increasingly concerned with raising awareness of the need to focus on Black women as targets of state violence and police brutality (Chatelain 2015, 54). This is reflected in its intersectional approach, which acquires even more significance when compared with previous civil rights movements: “Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black un-documented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum” (Garza 2016, 25). A bottom-up model of social activism and political engagement prompted by the key role social media has played in the development of the movement has also resulted in a broader conception of leadership based on the principle of “participatory democracy” and “radical inclusivity” (K. M. Q. Hall 2016, 87-88). Sarah J. Jackson also points out how online engagement with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has allowed ordinary people to voice their interests and underline the intersection of race with other categories such as gender or class in the lived experiences of Black people around the world (2016, 377). The movement has also emphasised connectivity and solidarity building across the different communities and it has been defined as a “global network” conducting actions all over the world in order to “build local power to intervene on Black communities affected by the state and vigilantes” (Ayisi 2018). According to Kia M. Q. Hall, “BLM embodies a holistic approach to political engagement that challenges both boundaries that seek to contain areas of political engagement and borders that seek to contain the freedom movement geographically” (2016, 96). In this sense, although chapters of BLM are mainly located in the US and Canada, its actions, scattered across locations as diverse as the UK, South Africa and even Latin American countries like Brazil, point in this direction, highlighting not

only its transnational scope but also the need to emphasise the internal heterogeneity of different racial groups (Kyungwon Hong 2017, 274), in an effort to build a global solidarity movement by establishing connections with other oppressed groups such as those involved in the Palestinian struggle. In the UK, the year 2016 saw the first action of the BLM movement as a response to the death of Jimmy Mubenga, close to the fifth anniversary of the shooting of Mark Duggan and coinciding with the release of the video of Paul O'Neal's shooting in Chicago (McVeigh 2016). While so far the visibility of BLM in the UK has been relatively small, its actions have emphasised the need to draw attention to the underrepresentation of the issue of police violence in the country.

Intersectionality, together with the solidarity building and transnational practices of activism that inform the BLM movement, permeates the performances of the *Black Lives, Black Words* project, founded by Reginald Edmund in Chicago in 2015.¹ This article focuses on the thematic and aesthetic choices of three of the plays commissioned for the reopening of the Bush Theatre in London in 2017, the third UK season of the *BLBW* project, as well as the ways in which these dramatic and theatrical strategies echo the BLM movement. It discusses the interlocking choices of subject matter and performance strategies, while highlighting their shared commitment to activism. The textual analysis of the plays is combined with an analysis of the performances, drawing on the notes I took during my attendance at the event together with material collected from publicly available interviews with the playwrights.

2. FORGING SOLIDARITY THROUGH COLLECTIVE ARTISTIC ACTIVISM: *Black Lives, Black Words*

In tracing the history of the BLM movement, Christopher J. Lebron makes a significant connection with the Harlem Renaissance by highlighting how Black art can “stand in stark contrast with the surrounding conditions of racial oppression, lynching, and segregation—the true conditions of Black lives not mattering” (2017, 37). Following in this same line, Edmund initiated *BLBW* in 2015, drawing on Nina Simone's conception of art as a form of activism to respond to the question “do Black lives matter today?” (Edmund 2017, ix). The project was first taken from the US to the UK in the same year, 2015, by Edmund and Simeilia Hodge-Dallaway, founder and Managing Director of Artistic Directors of the Future (ADF), in partnership with Madani Younis, former Artistic Director of the Bush Theatre and the Southbank Centre in London. Highlighting the transnational nature of the project, Younis describes *BLBW* as “a conversation held across continents, where we come together to speak to the vital question of what is the value of Black lives in America, the UK and across the world”

¹ The project, henceforth *BLBW*, was taken back to Chicago in 2019, where Mojisola Adebayo's *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* (2017b) was reenacted at the “I am...Fest” at Goodman Theatre in April 2019. More information about the project's past and future productions can be found on its website (*Black Lives, Black Words* 2015).

(2017, v).² In 2017, the *BLBW* project was brought back to the UK for the reopening of the Bush Theatre in London, premiering the plays of four local Afro-descendant British-born playwrights commissioned by ADF for the occasion—Mojisola Adebayo's *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* (2017b), Winsome Pinnock's *The Principles of Cartography* (2017), Rachel De-lahay's *My White Friend* (2017b) and Somalia Seaton's *Womb* (2017)—together with other international pieces that combined poetry, spoken word and performance. The plays, which fit the ten-minute-long format requested by the project, were all presented as stage readings.

BLBW is characterised by a complex intertwining of local and international stories, as each performance brings new playwrights together, which has become the basis of a type of solidarity that is inventive, creative and rooted in what David Featherstone calls “place-based political activity” (2012, 30). Scholars such as Featherstone himself (2012), Tommie Shelby (2005) and feminists Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984; 2003), bell hooks (1984) and Angela Davis (2016) have extensively theorised about the potential for forging solidarities as a tool for political change in social movements such as BLM. Mohanty, for instance, defines solidarity “in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities” and emphasises that “diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances” (2003, 7). Similarly, Edwin Mayorga and Bree Picower distinguish between unity, a “homogenizing form” that reproduces the underlying systems of oppression, and “active radical solidarity,” which they refer to as “a practice of holding up a recognition of how people’s liberation is bound up in one another’s, while the conditions, needs, and notions of liberation remain distinct” (2018, 220). Likewise, solidarity is understood by Featherstone as a relation among diverse groups that is based on a political struggle to challenge different forms of oppression. Featherstone highlights the importance of a type of solidarity, which he defines as “solidarity from below,” constructed and forged by marginalised groups to challenge traditional and fixed conceptualisations of the sides from which solidarity is usually mobilised (2012, 5). In many cases, this solidarity is also understood as transnational in its broader potential of reaching beyond the nation-state to connect diverse communities in the fight against multiple oppressions. In this vein, *BLBW* makes a dual commitment to the local and the global, emphasising the need to foreground the particularity of local stories while establishing transnational

² One contextual and terminological difference on the two sides of the Atlantic is that while *Black* in the US is almost synonymous with Afro-American, the recent history of the term in the UK is more complex, having gone through a phase of strategic alliance that included African, Asian and other minorities, later diversifying into ethnic-specific terms and coexisting with current census-based terms such as *BAME* (Black and Asian Minority Ethnic). The term *Afro-descendant* is used in this article to refer to the playwrights as a broad category that encompasses those born in the UK but who are descendants of people of African or Caribbean origin. For instance, Rachel De-lahay's father was born in St. Kitts but her mother was born in the UK and grew up in Pakistan; she rejects the label *Black* and considers herself as mixed-race. Conversely, Adebayo is also mixed-race but aligns herself with the label *Black British*.

connections. By so doing, the project seeks to create a space where these transnational practices of solidarity can be engaged in creatively, drawing on the potential of theatre and creative artistic activism to foster social change.

The project's transnational nature particularly underscores the diasporic historical ties between Africa, the Caribbean, the UK and the US, a terrain that has been explored in depth by British cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall (1990) and Paul Gilroy (1993), both of whom stress the need for combined transnational and local/differential analyses and foreground the link between art and politics, with specific references to the Black Arts movements on both shores. Such a transnational framework becomes relevant for the analysis of the transatlantic artistic connections that underpin *BLBW* and sit at the core of some of the playwrights' past productions, particularly Adebayo's and Pinnock's. The impact of the quadrangular axis between the US, Africa, the Caribbean and the UK on Black British theatre has recently been emphasised by Michael Pearce in his book *Black British Drama: A Transnational Story* (2017). According to Pearce, "by examining black British plays in relation to international examples and practices, the degree to which black British drama is influenced by, and how it articulates, a politics of race-based solidarity can also be assessed" (2017, 15). In *BLBW* this solidarity is most obviously achieved through the affective connection that is established between audience members, actors and playwrights in the recognition of such shared oppressions and stories. This *affect* is mobilised not only through the themes addressed in the plays, but also, and particularly, through their aesthetics, reflecting the recent increase of attention being paid to what Hans-Thies Lehmann termed the "aesthetics of response-ability" in his ground-breaking *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006, 185). Scholars such as Helena Grehan (2009), Nicholas Ridout (2009), Mireia Aragay (2014) and Aragay and Martin Middeke (2017a) have also examined the role of theatre in close relation to its potential to activate spectators' ethical awareness and response to a performance: "Theatre and performance may even appear, from a Levinasian perspective, as privileged cultural practices as regards the exploration of ethical issues since they seem to be based, almost literally, on co-presence, on the face-to-face encounter between embodied, vulnerable spectators and Others wherein the former are summoned to respond, to become actively engaged in an exemplary exercise of ethical 'response-ability'" (Aragay 2014, 4-5). In this regard, the performance of *BLBW* at the Bush Theatre in 2017 made use of Brechtian alienation techniques—the presentation of the plays as stage readings with minimal performance, the lack of props, the use of choral performance and the spatial politics of the Bush, which invited the audience to stand up surrounding the actors as if they were witnesses—in order to emphasise an ethics of response-ability that called for audience members to become accountable for what they were seeing, encouraged critical distance from the theatrical performance itself and fostered connections with the real world. Notably, the strategy of inviting theatregoers to stand up throughout the performance, intended by the Bush Theatre as a form of protest, offered audience members the opportunity to actively

take part in the BLM movement, thus accentuating the solidarity rationale behind the project.

In the context of Black British theatre, especially since the beginning of the new millennium, a number of playwrights have explicitly addressed the topic of police and state violence against Black communities in the UK (Osborne 2006; Goddard 2015, 2018; Pearce 2017). Many of the works fit into what has been described as *knife-crime plays*, focusing on inner city life and Black-on-Black violence and gang culture, as is the case in certain plays by Bola Agbaje, Roy Williams and Kwame Kwei-Armah. The prevalence of plays dealing with violence in contemporary Black British drama has been criticised for offering a limited representation of Black British life (Osborne 2006; Goddard 2015), which often caters to white mainstream theatre tastes and reinscribes negative, ghettoised, stereotypical views of Black people in the UK corresponding “to the media ‘comfort zone’” (Osborne 2006, 97). This concern is reflected in the now famous statement made by Patricia Cumper, former director of Talawa Theatre Company, for the *Guardian*—“I will not put another dead young black man on stage” (2012, 419-20)—which points to the characteristic ending of these plays, portraying young Black men being shot or stabbed in the final scenes (Goddard 2009, 300). Although most of the plays staged within the *BLBW* project deal with police brutality and state violence against Black communities as their main concern—and the Bush Theatre plays are not an exception—they depart from mainstream productions dealing with violence against Black people by recentering the performance on a celebration of Black lives designed to give voice to the voiceless. At the same time, characters are presented in most cases as active resisters who contest the system rather than being its passive victims, a strategy that is shared by the aesthetics of the BLM movement. Adebayo’s *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* casts light on a less well-known case of police violence against a Black woman, placing special emphasis on the intersectionality of the BLM movement. Pinnock’s *The Principles of Cartography* focuses on a local context but emphasises the importance of mapping local struggles in transnational movements. De-lahay’s piece, *My White Best Friend*, engages with wider conversations about the role of white people in the BLM movement, appealing to the need for building solidarity across racial lines. Seaton’s play, *Womb*, also part of the event at the Bush Theatre, deals with another local incident of violence against Black people in the UK and is particularly powerful in underscoring Black women as activists, rejecting their victimisation and highlighting their work in the fight for equality. However, for reasons of space it has been omitted from the analysis, as its main theme is already partially addressed in Pinnock’s play.

As I discuss in the sections that follow, each play is unique and approaches a specific issue in its own right, but the pieces also interact dialogically with each other and with the *BLBW* movement to expand the collective range of creative activism. Although Adebayo’s and Pinnock’s earlier work has been examined from transnational and diasporic perspectives (Griffin 2003; Goddard 2007, forthcoming; Osborne 2013; Pearce 2017), it is significant that the *BLBW* project, although running since 2015 and produced

in several cities, has not received critical attention.³ My own focus here is on how this transnational dialogue and exchange can become a powerful force for collective artistic activism and how certain aesthetic choices may contribute to achieving such aims.

3. *THE INTERROGATION OF SANDRA BLAND: AMPLIFICATION AND CHORAL PERFORMANCE*

Adebayo's contribution to the Bush Theatre event recalls the arrest and interrogation of Black activist Sandra Bland by police officer Brian Encinia in Texas in July 2015, through the transcript of the dashcam footage released after she was imprisoned and found hanged in her cell three days later. In doing so, Adebayo connects the experiences of police brutality in two countries where state violence against Black people is pervasive, her native UK and the US, but she is particularly drawing attention to the portrayal of Black women as differentially affected by state violence and police brutality. Sandra Bland's case received little media attention compared to other better-known cases such as those of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin. When analysing the intersection of race and gender in relation to violence against Black women, Kimberlé Crenshaw emphasises that it is "because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, [that] women of color are marginalized within both" (1991, 1244). Campaigns such as #SayHerName or #BlackGirlsMatter have increasingly begun to draw attention to the different ways in which women are affected by state violence and particularly the specific ways in which violence and gender intersect. In this regard, Adebayo's piece becomes a vindication of the role of memory and the need to widen the scope of discussions around violence against Black communities and, specifically, Black women. Adebayo's choice to focus on an American story reflects some of the cultural and stylistic influences shaping her previous work and which, according to Pearce, are shared by many other Black British playwrights, who look to "black America as a model, a resource and a means by which to articulate political and cultural solidarity" (2017, 43).

The Interrogation of Sandra Bland takes the form of a verbatim play in which Sandra Bland's words during her arrest are staged by a chorus of Black female actors from different backgrounds. However, Adebayo points out that she did not want to "just re-stage the real life scene" and adds that she is not interested in "verbatim plays that only translate reality rather than transport the audience imaginatively. I want theatre to do something that a webpage, a news clip or a mainstream documentary cannot do" (2017c, 160). Adebayo achieves this by relying on an emotional choral performance that amplifies Sandra Bland's voice and story: "My idea in having Sandra Bland played by a huge chorus of black women is that she is shown as an everyblackwoman. We elevate Sandra Bland's status and the status of all black people who have faced similar situations, through the amplification

³ The exception is Lynette Goddard's chapter on the performance's affective registers (forthcoming). I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Goddard for granting me permission to read her unpublished manuscript.

of the voice, a magnification of the struggle” (Adebayo 2017c, 160). Lynette Goddard maintains that incidents between Black people and the police often involve a silencing of the former’s testimonies: “when black people die in incidents involving the police or the state, they have no voice, no recall, no way of telling what happened, and it is friends, family and community activists who take up the fight for justice” (2018, 74). By delving into Sandra Bland’s story, Adebayo engages spectators in a transnational conversation about the value and precarity of Black lives, particularly those of Black women, both in the UK and the US, but she is also meeting “the locational standard of intersectionality by which the perspectives of the oppressed move from margin to center,” to borrow Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree’s words (2010, 138).

Rather than revictimising Sandra Bland by retelling her story in the form of realist conventions, Adebayo chooses the strategy of amplification and collective choral performance. By having a chorus of female Black actresses perform Sandra Bland’s words while Encinia’s words and those of the other police officer involved in the arrest are read by only two white actors, Adebayo’s play not only magnifies Sandra Bland’s testimony of the arrest, but it also offers a call for solidarity by connecting experiences of racism, sexism and oppression in different times and locales. Significantly, the year after Sandra Bland’s death, another Black woman, Sarah Reed, was also found dead in her cell at Holloway Prison, London. Thus, the choral performance that amplifies Sandra Bland’s words, Adebayo recognises, “becomes a collective gesture of solidarity and support” (2017c, 161). To reinforce this effect, *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* breaks with traditional dramatic conventions in a number of ways. Drawing on the role of choral performance in ancient tragedies, Adebayo disrupts the traditional dialogic form associated with drama. In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann explains the function of the chorus as follows: “A chorus offers the possibility of manifesting a collective body that assumes a relationship to social phantasms and desires of fusion. It is obvious that it hardly takes any directional effort to make the audiences associate choruses on stage with masses of people in reality (of classes, the people, the collective). The chorus formally negates the conception of an individual entirely separated from the collective” (2006, 130). The powerful effect of reading Sandra Bland’s words as a collective of voices does not erase, however, her own individual voice. Rather, it becomes a forceful strategy to call for affective identification: “By reading her words aloud, the whole room steps into her shoes” (Adebayo 2017a). This affective identification is reinforced by the staging of the play, not only through the use of verbatim techniques, but also through the arrangement of the audience in the newly refurbished Bush Theatre. As mentioned earlier, rather than sit comfortably in their seats, spectators were asked to stand up surrounding the actors, who were placed on different podiums, thus being positioned as witnesses, responsible for questioning the underlying inequalities of Sandra Bland’s case. Marissia Fragkou and Goddard have highlighted how the notion of witnessing is often discussed by theatre scholars as a device that promotes an affective response, particularly in the context of verbatim theatre (2013, 147). This affective identification

with the actors and the role of the audience as witnesses not only encourage spectators to empathise with the case, but also position them in the role of having to act upon an injustice, thereby prompting wider societal engagement and action. The ending of the performance, in which Adebayo chooses not to explicitly represent Sandra Bland's hanging in her cell, also departs from the parameters of realist plays.

Additionally, the use of repetition throughout the performance is of vital importance to reinforce the audience's affective response. From the very beginning, we learn that the reason for Sandra Bland being stopped by the police was a failure to signal a lane change while driving. The levity of the infraction is constantly accentuated by Sandra Bland's repetition of the words, "For a failure to signal? You're doing all this / for a failure to signal?" (Adebayo 2017b, 165). The use of repetition is even more prominent in her interactions with police officer Encinia, who, from the beginning, resorts to remarking on Sandra Bland's emotional state—"You Ok?", "You seem very irritated" (163)—the reiteration serving to underline problematic masculinities that are typically entangled in the racial matrix of police brutality and violence in the case of Black women. Brian Pitman et al. highlight how "from a structural perspective, we can understand interactions between police and black women as opportunities for law enforcement to reinforce the racial regime and the dominance of masculinity" (2017, 483). Sandra Bland's use of repetitions, more intense at the end of her arrest, exposes this underlying motive: "This make you feel real good don't it. It make you feel real good don't it? A female for a traffic ticket, for a traffic ticket. / Don't make you feel good Officer Encinia? I know it make you feel real good. You're a real man now" (Adebayo 2017b, 168). Sandra Bland's words, part of the original transcription, show her awareness of the gendered power dynamics involved in her case and in turn reinforce this awareness in the spectators. The choral repetition of this (verbatim) insight by Sandra Bland and the spectators' affective involvement as witnesses combine into a powerful collective performance that is clearly in tune with issues of intersectionality underpinning the BLM movement, magnified through the aesthetics of the play.

4. MAPPING THE STRUGGLE: WINSOME PINNOCK'S *The Principles of Cartography*
 Pinnock's play focuses on police brutality against Black people in the UK, trying to map Black British stories within the narrative of state violence and the BLM movement, and emphasising, as Mohanty advocates, the importance of recognising specific differences in the forging of transnational alliances. In *The Principles of Cartography* the lives of two Black Britons—Abi, an elderly Black female, and Cherry, a woman in her thirties/forties—intersect through a pointedly frequent event in the streets of London: "A young man. Surrounded by police" (Pinnock 2017, 139). Cliff, the Black man being stopped by the police, is in his late twenties/early thirties and describes himself as an "innocent maker of maps" who "scope[s] reality in the names of the streets" (140, 138). The three characters belong to different generations. Cliff is deeply marked by the diasporic influences

recurrent in Pinnock's migration narratives and is "shattered": "between the old life and this one is a gap, like the hole where a tooth should be. My tongue explores it, searching for meaning" (139). In the same way, he draws maps in search of meaning, "drawing flourishes of his own" (138) to replace the concrete of the streets of London. Abi, who lives in the Hanover Park Care Home or, as she describes it, "a processing centre for people who are refugees from their old lives" (138), mixes memories from the Middle Passage with the scene of police brutality she witnesses through the window, thus exploring the legacies of colonialism in contemporary lived experiences: "when we were tortured by the sound of the angry boiling sea and the thumb-thumb-thumb of shark's tails against the stern as they followed us, hungry for a body jumped or thrown overboard" (139). As Cliff is being searched by the police and "they pluck at his shirt, his trousers, turn him around, pluck at his pockets, squeeze his cheeks to look inside his mouth," Abi connects his experience with her memories of how they "jabbed and prodded us, counted our teeth to determine how healthy we were, before putting us on the block" (139). Pinnock's reference to transatlantic slave trade memories through the character of Abi explicitly underscores the interconnections between the genealogy of racism embedded in contemporary violence against Black people on both sides of the Atlantic.

Like Adebayo, Pinnock makes use of choral performance, as the play starts with the collective reading of a list of streets in South London. The play maps violence on Black bodies in the streets of London and emphasises the importance of retelling history and locating struggles. *The Principles of Cartography*, although decidedly local when compared to Adebayo's piece, remaps well-known London streets as spaces of transnationally recognisable violence. Moreover, the play becomes a cartography in reverse. By walking these streets and creating his own maps out of his embodied experience of space, Cliff disrupts colonial cartographic practices. Social spatial practices have been widely theorised (de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991), particularly the ways in which the practice of walking in the city can be considered an appropriation of space. Since Blackness has typically been associated with containment in urban spaces, concentrating Black subjects in specific areas, the practice of walking and map making in the play can be considered transgressive in itself. Cliff makes London's space his own by means of what he captures in his map, emphasising affective practices of space: "I ain't done nothing. I am an innocent maker of maps. Ask anybody round here they'll tell you. They've all seen me out and about taking note of the street names. My maps show what the other maps don't tell you. My map marks Mrs. Lee's kindness on the corner of Gainer Close, kids' laughter on Summer Road, the smell of fresh cut grass on Peckham Rye..." (140). As we reach the end of the piece, Cliff is taken away in an ambulance after being tasered by the police, while Abi—"whose chest swells with ancient anger" (142)—and Cherry and her son bear witness to the incident. When Cherry and her son return home, retracing Cliff's steps with a recitation of the streets, they get lost. Significantly, as they arrive home, Cherry's son draws a map: "At the location of the scene he's drawn where the man fell, the placement of the police, but he's rubbed them out again. All that's left of them are faint lines and eraser fluff. The

rest of our route that day intact. He gives me the map and says ‘Now you’ll never be lost again’” (142). The map drawn by Cherry’s son, which no longer shows what happened, underlines the importance of memory as a site of resistance, which can be linked to Michel Foucault’s notion of counter-memory (1977). To counteract this erasure, the piece ends with a return to the opening of the play, the choral repetition of the streets of Peckham inscribing them in spectators’ memories as the lights fade. The choral recitations that open and close the play point to a need to counteract the consistent erasing of stories of violence against Black people, a strategy that is shared by BLM actions.

5. “IF BLACK LIVES MATTER, THEN ALL LIVES MATTER”: RACHEL DE-LAHAY’S *My White Best Friend*

While the BLM movement and the *BLBW* project revolve mainly around state and police violence against Black people, its founders have emphasised the need to explore all areas in which Black lives are being marginalised or oppressed. De-lahay chooses to deal with the less represented issue of racist microaggressions. In examining transnational practices of activism within political projects such as BLM and exploring the potential of solidarities, it seems of the utmost importance to also talk about whiteness and white allies, as De-lahay chooses to do. Significantly, some BLM actions have particularly highlighted the role of white people as activists in the movement, as some of the UK movement protests attest.

My White Best Friend is performed as a stage reading of several excerpts from a diary, in which a single white female actor on the stage explores her relationship with her friend, De-lahay herself, the author of the diary. Interestingly, the performance starts with a request from the playwright, read out by the actor, to carry out an audience reshuffle—“all the girls need to be at the front. All brown, black, queer, disable [*sic*] girls, centre. All white, able-bodied men, fall back” (De-lahay 2017b, 173)—in an effort to emphasise how these lives are valued and appreciated in that space: “If we have the ability to reshuffle and change a small space like the Bush Theatre, so quickly, into a safe space, we have the ability to change the world” (180). Direct audience address, coupled with the repositioning of audience members in the theatre, activates the spectators’ ethical engagement by prompting them to reconsider the spatial politics of the theatre.

The play takes us through several events in the lives of Rachel and her white best friend as recalled in the former’s diary, but it mainly revolves around the time when Rachel’s white best friend starts spending time with Daina and Neetu, Rachel’s Black and brown friends. Things become awkward when at a party there is a report on TV about a march organised by the BLM movement in the UK after the killing of Alton Sterling, a Black man who was shot dead in Louisiana in 2016, and one of the white people at the party resorts to some of the backlash phrases associated with the BLM movement: “Black lives matter? Like, is that not racist? Like, why do they matter more?” (177). One of the responses to the BLM hashtag has been to consider the movement

exclusionary. In response to this criticism, Garza explains that “we are not saying Black Lives are more important than other lives, or that other lives are not criminalised and oppressed in various ways” (2016, 26). According to Judith Butler, “if we jump too quickly to the universal formulation ‘all lives matter,’ then we miss the fact that Black people have not yet been included in the idea of ‘all lives’”; she adds that in order “to make that universal formulation concrete, to make that into a living formulation, one that truly extends to all people, we have to foreground those lives that are not mattering now, to mark that exclusion, and militate against it” (2015). After this uncomfortable moment, the friendship between Rachel and her white best friend falters. Rachel expects her friend’s support, while her friend feels it is not her place to take a stand. This is further accentuated when Rachel has to face the racist and sexist comments of another party guest and once again comes up against her friend’s silence. The performance is a powerful critique against white privilege and particularly a call for white people’s action and involvement in the BLM movement. According to bell hooks, political solidarity between Black and white women will only be achieved when white women “are actively struggling to resist racist oppression in our society” and “help to change the direction of the feminist movement” (1984, 55). De-lahay’s play foregrounds this need through her white best friend’s words: “Maybe not everyday enjoying our privileges and coasting through life, comfortable. Maybe some days putting ourselves out there for somebody else. Standing up, loudly, visibly for someone less privileged and bearing the brunt of the brazen misogyny, racism and homophobia that can incur” (2017b, 180). In an interview for the *Guardian*, De-lahay explains that the piece was inspired by an LGBT march she joined by chance back in 2016 after the Orlando nightclub shooting:

I asked myself: why didn’t I choose to come here? What the hell does that say about me that I let my gay friends do this on their own? It made me question everything about what it means to fight for other people. I have a strong circle of smart, well-educated friends who want to make the world a better place. But I was interested in how sometimes these brilliant people who I love and love me do not necessarily fight for my rights. (2017a)

De-lahay’s performance invites audience members, especially white spectators, into self-reflection about their own silence and inaction—“This is the fight you and your white best friend will never have” (2017b, 180), we are reminded at the end of the performance. In particular, the piece calls into question the role of white people in the BLM movement, exploring the need to build solidarity not just across different geographical sites, but also across racial divides. But more importantly, the play highlights the imperative of a collective response that necessarily arises from engaging in conversation with what we are not usually exposed to. In this regard, the performance aesthetics, by putting De-lahay’s white best friend in front of an audience and asking her to read Rachel’s diary, makes the actor confront De-lahay’s view of her whiteness and the way she constructs their relationship. Additionally, the way in which the performance is set, which simulates De-

lahay's white best friend reading the diary for the first time, underlines this discomfort, which is potentially equally felt by audience members. In a sense, the performance, drawing on hooks's influential work on race and representation (1992), proposes a Black gaze into whiteness, which can have a powerful effect on the audience's own self-reflection.

7. CONCLUSION

The notions of intersectionality, solidarity and activism associated with the BLM movement that permeate the plays commissioned for the Bush Theatre in 2017 demonstrate how the overall *BLBW* international theatre project contributes to transnational artistic practices of solidarity by building on local and international stories of oppression while making local artists visible. I have argued that the performance of *BLBW* constitutes an act of solidarity in itself, which is further articulated through performance strategies, particularly those of a spatial and dialogic nature, that prompt the spectator's ethical engagement and response-ability. This is achieved both physically—through the request for audience members to stand up—and imaginatively—through affective repetition, verbatim witnessing and memory strategies—thereby situating spectators *within* the BLM movement. Thematically, the amplification of Black women's stories as victims of police violence, the revisiting of colonial legacies in discussing contemporary state violence, the mapping of violence and a call for action and white solidarity turn this group of plays into a collective struggle by drawing on Black art as a form of resistance and on production of knowledge through collaborative artistic activism on both sides of the Atlantic. While Adebayo's play engages with a US story of state violence against a Black woman, but leads local spectators to perceive her as "everyblackwoman," Pinnock's and De-lahay's plays engage with local concerns affecting Black communities in the UK, highlighting the importance of place-based solidarity in the building of transnational alliances and engaging in conversation about the value of Black lives globally. As a whole, in their dialogic relations and individually, these three plays stage a shared commitment to solidarity, evidencing their potential to build transnational activist, creative networks.⁴

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Paola Prieto López is a lecturer at the University of Oviedo. She graduated in English Philology from the University of Oviedo in 2013. She completed an MA in Language Pedagogy at the University of Utah in 2015 and worked as a Marie-Curie researcher for the EU "Gender and Cultures of Equality" (GRACE) project between 2016 and 2019.