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1 There isn't really a door, only a series of gaps between exposed pipes. Rolly, heavily pregnant and holding a prison-issued plastic bag containing all of her worldly possessions, enters through one of these gaps onto the stage. Brimming with rotting mattresses, takeaway boxes and cans, the stage is a morass, a dumpsite. More specially located still, it is the rat's nest of Clean Break Theatre Company's *Pests* by Vivienne Franzmann, festering Upstairs at the Royal Court Theatre in 2014.

2 Atop a rake of mattresses another figure is crouched: Rolly's sister, Pink. She sniffs the air. Then, picking her way across "*blood/shit/food/who knows*" (Franzmann, 2014, p. 5), Pink scampers to meet Rolly. The two bounce from side to side, sizing each other up. Suddenly they explode into a roll together, scrapping and chasing each other up and down heaps of debris. The pipework shudders. Rolly manages to get Pink in a headlock: "Release! Release da fur" snarls Pink (*ibid.*, p. 6).

3 *Release da fur*: In states of being between rat and human, Pink and Rolly release both fur, and much more than fur: they chart conditions between recently-imprisoned and soon-to-be-imprisoned. Pink and Rolly blur across, and decompose, multiple identities, between woman, rat, enemy, sister, jobseeker, addict, dreamer and waste. Throughout the play, these liminalities of identity become punctured with acts of rape, threats of murder, along a constant ache of Pink and Rolly's life in severe poverty. Seventeen short scenes chart the course of several months as Rolly and Pink adjust to living together again following Rolly's prison sentence. Rolly tries to get a job, and maintain her sobriety, while Pink retreats further into "gnaw" (heroin). An untreated mental health disorder causes Pink to experience hallucinations, which seep across the stage in

bright red or crackling white digital projections. Knife blades slice through the walls of the nest. At other times, the set appears to jump with electric shock.

4 Written following residencies in six women's prisons and secure mental health units in the UK, Franzmann intended *Pests* to be a "campaigning" work to middle-class audiences, the majority of whom do not have lived experience of the criminal justice system (Gentleman, 2014). Commissioned by London-based Clean Break Theatre Company, who work with women in prison and women at risk, the play makes explicit links between the social exclusion and stigmatisation of its characters, Rolly and Pink, to criminalization in British society. Frantically pacing around her nest, Pink rattles a timeline of their short lives to date: "Alkie nutnutjob dad, piss, shit, punch, junkie mum, no shoes, lice, black eye, care, fucked, excluded, bullied, foster home, gnaw, prison, gnaw, prison, gnaw, prison" (Franzmann, 2014, p. 39). She anticipates the response of a middle-class audience by interrupting herself to gush "Oh my gosh, it must have been so terrible for you. I can't imagine what it must have been like to have been born into a life of such deprivational violence. Horrifying. Absolute horrification" (*ibid*.)

5 In this article, I explore *Pests* as a campaign waged through atmosphere, in which social conditions of dispossession in the UK become addressed through miasmas of decay and pollution. Within the miasmas of *Pests*, waste, animality and the aftermath of prison become conflated in a literal trash floe on set; as scents and video projections move between the space of performance and the space of audience, miasma also envelopes audiences within its atmosphere. This atmospheric process, I argue, is essential to the critique of the criminal justice system within *Pests*: the miasma that suffuses the space of the theatre emanates from a collectively held social imaginary about women, crime and the role of prison in British society. [1]

6 Why is the concept of miasma, now relatively obscure, central to this endeavour? In our contemporary period, miasma is most widely understood as a disease etiology predicated on an idea of foul air as climactic contaminant, discredited in the late Victorian period in favour of germ theory. Although *Pests* offers a scrum of rats, filth, violence and extreme poverty – and is in this deeply evocative of perceptions of social and public health in the Victorian period – *Pests* also demonstrates miasma's relevance to contemporary British society far in excess of this limited connotation. The depiction of two ex-offenders, stuck within the figurative and material pollutions of *Pests*, stresses a set of Western cultural practices that has long equated moral hygiene with environmental hygiene (Welton, 2012), activating a continuum of atmosphere and discipline that extends across millennia to ancient Greece. Miasma first developed in seventh century BC as a term to describe contagious religious, moral and social pollution (Parker, 1983). The term quickly took on more interpretations and applications, which encompass air, seepage, pollution, social normativity within dynamics of performance, in both social and theatrical senses. As a concept, miasma developed alongside medical, religious, legal and dramaturgical epistemologies in archaic and classical Greece, as I discuss at length elsewhere (McPhee, 2018). In the theatre of *Pests*, we breathe from ancient air: waste, thematics of stigma, polluted morality, intersections of human and animal, all within a dramaturgy of the aftermath, and never receding threat, of imprisonment.

7 When considered as an atmosphere comprised of suffering, disease, "badness", hygiene, morality, and spectatorship, miasma represents what Riedel (2019) terms an

atmospheric "meshwork", carrying components of atmosphere: "a logic of inside and outside or of temporal difference, … stabilis[ing] an affective field by charging it with identity and difference – thus rendering it meaningful" (Riedel, 2019, p. 270). It is through these logics and cross-pollutions of inside/outside and variegated temporalities that miasma becomes exemplary of atmosphere in, and as, an interpretive mode. Miasma offers a rich, if hazed, lens through which to discuss the intersections of theatre and the criminal justice system partly because it is a pollution; and in this role as pollution miasma crosses eras, fostering connections between past and present, across boundaries of specialisms (medicine, law, humanities, governance, among others), becoming what classicist and scholar of pollution Fabian Meinel calls "a medium of negotiation … a tool to "construct worlds of meaning" and coherence out of incoherence, chaos and disorder" (Meinel, 2015, p. 20 et f.). Within this interpretive mode, I suggest, miasma can give audiences and performers the opportunity to negotiate, experience and reflect on one of the most frightening and pervasive features of contemporary society: carceral power.

8 The campaigning function of miasmatic atmosphere within *Pests* moves the usual representational sites of prison into an aesthetic seepage, a haze and a pollution, in which prison never appears; yet the aftermath, and the future, of prison functions here as a carceral logic, organizing the dramaturgical semantics, temporalities and atmospheres of the play, to signify the conditions of "carceral society" at large. In the carceral society of the United Kingdom, prison and policing provide a rationale for stigmatizing forms of social normativity (Foucault, 1975, 1995). The most recent *Women in Prison* report at the time of writing exposes an endemic relationship between stigma and criminalization:

- Over 60% of women in contact with the criminal justice system have experienced domestic abuse.
- 53% of women in prison report having experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse during childhood.
- 31% women in prison have spent time in local authority care as a child.
- Women in custody are five times more likely to have a mental health concern than women in the general population.
- 39% of women report having a problem with drugs upon arrival into prison.
- Black and minority ethnic women are 25% more likely than white women to be sentenced to custody at crown court (Women in Prison 2020)

9 In *Eve Was Framed: Women and British Justice*, criminal barrister Helena Kennedy QC reflects on decades of representing women in court: "None of these women require traditional incarceration but they are squeezed into a system that was designed for male offenders. Imprisonment is used as a means of social control, and that is particularly true in relation to women" (Kennedy, 2005, p. 81). Prison provides rationale for stigmatizing concepts of social normativity, in which fantasies of morality, social belonging, and public health become mixed up with adjudications on civic matters. In carceral societies, the concept of prison seeps through national consciousness, regulating space, socio-economic frameworks, culture, temporality, and identities.[2]

10 The regulations of prison also generate, and are generated by, atmosphere. In their 2015 article on atmospheres within prison museums, carceral geographers Jennifer Turner and Kimberley Peters propose the concept of "carceral atmosphere". Analysing

carceral spaces through and as atmosphere, suggest Turner and Peters, offers a formulation of how carceral power works on spatial, material, emotional and affective terms. The complexity of atmosphere as a concept is itself appropriate to articulating the complexity of carceral power:

> being alert to the elusive, intangible, felt, aspects of carceral space that seep from, and are designed, engineered and co-constituted around material and visual components of the museum, opens up a more enlivened and "full" sense of space: the atmospheres that surround us, shape us and are shaped by us. (Turner, Peters, 2015, p. 317)

11 Carceral atmospheres in prison museum spaces activate visitors' experience of the formerly carceral (in decommissioned prisons), yet are imbued with a liveliness of the carceral through sensorial engagements with prison histories, spaces, sounds and sights. As Turner and Peters note, carceral atmospheres engage a range of emotional and affective response, including shock, fear and sadness, but also "glee and enjoyment" (*ibid*., p. 321). These responses are co-constituted by visitors in touristic experience of carceral space, and by the carceral space itself, as atmosphere. Building on these reflections on carceral atmosphere within decommissioned prisons, I am interested in what happens to carceral atmospheres when the space of prison is completely removed, as it is in the staging of *Pests* on both material and figurative levels. Dislocated and de-anchored from the locality of prison, how do carceral atmospheres become generated? Further, what subversive or politicizing properties might they carry, when removed from prison's usual representational sites? I propose miasma as a productive way into theorizing a sensorial experience what the phenomena and aesthetics of carcerality comprise, at a remove from the site of prison; in *Pests*, carceral atmospheres become leeched, in other words, from the audiences' imaginary through miasma. Through what I term *miasmatic performance*, *Pests* questions what is "authentic" about staged representations of criminality; subverts these representations through processes of decomposition; and proposes the carceral as a relational event, manifested through the social participation of theatre audiences.

12 Inherent to the treatment of audiences here is my own position as a kind of specialist audience member at performances of *Pests*. As a Clean Break's company member from 2009-2015, I led on marketing and audience development for the company's productions. I was also in the audience for many performances, post-show talks and panels, generally observing the audience and myself-as-audience. These experiences led me to develop what performance scholar Susan Melrose has called the uneasiness of the "expert spectator", in which

> the expert-practitioner-researcher's undertakings are likely to involve … a "disciplined unknowing" – an apparently curious and fragile knowledge-state … This quasi-unknowing operates effectively as a "model of intelligibility", or way of knowing and understanding, that the expert practitioner recognizes. It renders the researcher's investment relatively fragile, and … it is thus "affectively-undergirded". (Melrose, 2007)

13 As I uneasily spectated, it became clear to me that *all* audience members around me were also experts. Our shared expertise was in spectatorship of carceral narratives. Yet as Clean Break put on several productions, among them *Pests*, that complicated the barriers between audiences and performers, made use of unusual sites for performance, and deployed dramaturgical techniques that prevented catharsis or resolution,[3] I noticed that some expectations of what a play about criminal justice would be *like* became overturned, and turned over unexpected emotions in the

audience. Penal sites of brutality, confinement, grief, hope and freedom dreams give shape to, yet do not limit, the affective dimensions of the carceral condition that comes across in Clean Break's theatre. Something about the distanced-immediacy of prison, its invisible-pervasiveness, its exclusionary-collectivity, touches audiences, expresses those zones of incarceration that are inaccessible to many audience members at theatres such as the Royal Court, but in which they nevertheless participate.

Authenticity in *Pests*

14 "[*Pests*] is brutal, but it is authentic," says playwright Vivienne Franzmann (Gentleman, 2014). She wrote the play to raise awareness on what women in prison frequently report as part of their lived experience: poverty; domestic violence and sexual assault; and childhoods spent in local authority care (ibid.). *Pests* toured first to the Manchester Royal Exchange and Royal Court, who co-produced the play with Clean Break; it then continued on to Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre, the Liverpool Everyman, and the Plymouth Drum, concluding its run at Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 2014. Speaking to audiences at a Royal Court post-show talk, Franzmann expressed her aims in clear terms:

> The main thing for me is: what are we doing? Why are we locking these women up for hours at a time, giving them meaningless jobs to do while in prison, not helping them? The treatment of women in prison feels immoral. ... I feel it [*Pests*] opens the door on a world that [audiences at the theatres on the tour] don't fully understand, and on people that those audiences don't necessarily have any contact with. ... There's no way I could have written this play if I hadn't had access to prison, and to this place [Clean Break] ... It feels like the experience is authentic, the play is authentic. (Clean Break, 2014)

15 Where, as Franzmann suggests, there is immorality alive in a society that could allow vulnerable people to be locked up, *Pests* drives hard at engendering outrage and shock at that immorality. An empowered position of the playwright speaking to Royal Court audiences as a collective "we" speaks both to the campaign's orientation toward a class of theatre-goers who do not themselves have lived experience of the criminal justice system, and to the complex question of authenticity in this play. Where does the claim to authenticity reside? What is authentic, in other words, about women performing as rat people within a trash floe? Here what is paradoxically authentic about rattified women relates to the structural impacts of criminalization conveyed through an irreality of waste landscapes. In *Pests* the rattification of vulnerable women distends the aesthetic and performative space of the play enough for Franzmann to argue that its narrative of criminalizing conditions becomes highly "authentic", perhaps even more authentic than what the same play written within the conventions of social realism could achieve.

16 In claiming this authenticity, the question immediately arises: why enter into a schematic of full-blown degradation – does *Pests* risk entrenching the dispossessions inherent to a "horrification" of poverty porn, in which abjection and victimhood become overrepresented, appropriative and silencing? If not, how does it move beyond this – how might *Pests* foster on the contrary an ethical encounter with dispossession, one that might, as Athena Athanasiou proposes in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*, "encounter the challenge of conveying broken human corporeality – at once all too represented and radically unrepresentable?" (Butler, Athanasiou, 2013, p. 132).

17 The example of *Pests*, in which rat women scrap, dream and shoot up in a waste landscape, illustrates that what is conceived as authentic by the playwright aligns to, on one level, her experience and impressions of the voices and lives of women in secure settings, and on another, to an authentic fantasy of a collectively held social imaginary around women and crime. And it is this imaginary, through carceral fantasy, which itself authentically contributes to the dispossession and criminalization of the urban poor (Brown, 2009; Griffiths, 2016; Wacquant, 2009).

18 In precipitating carceral fantasies, that are yet researched, written and performed in close collaboration with women in prison and women at risk, *Pests* interpellates theatre audiences as participants in carceral power through atmospheres in which prison is kept peripheral, looming, remanded to the edges of the theatre. In part this occurs due to the ability of atmosphere to articulate the fragile boundaries between what is perceived as "immaterial" and "material" in society (McCormack, 2014). This is core to the ability of atmosphere to expose carceral power: within the racist cultures of white heteropatriarchy, prison and policing rely on a constant metaphysics of presence by being seemingly immaterial to some demographics, while unremittingly material to others. There are radically differential degrees of carceral atmosphere's investment in us: for Black, Indigenous and people of colour living within regimes of white heteropatriarchy in the United Kingdom, United States and other carceral states these are necropolitical atmospheres (Mbembe, 2003). Atmospheres make the differential power of carcerality evident to theatre audiences by rendering prison as what Derek McCormack terms an "atmospheric thing" - both materially present, and an intersubjective, relational condition. Such atmospheric things are, in McCormack's terms, are both "worldly entity" and "withdrawn from the world" (McCormack, 2014, p. 620). *Pests* is able to challenge the audience's relationship to carceral thingness by activating carceral atmospheres at the theatre: it works atmospherically to render ideas of "prison" and "criminality" as intersubjective, and to both elicit, and simultaneously confound, a collective desire to attribute a clear function for prison in society.

19 On one level this is facilitated through the semiotic nexus of the play, which pulls overtly from a miasmatic sensory vocabulary forged from the early modern period onwards as disease theories of miasma responded to epidemics of plague. Transmissions of illness – and also criminality, poverty, and immorality – were widely thought during the Victorian period to occur through miasmas: travelling, infectious atmospheres redolent of foul air, which held the power, purportedly, to plunge the socius into moral and physical decrepitude. Theatres and prisons were considered the chief generators of miasma, along with hospitals (Hannaway, 1993, p. 305). And it is here that the material decompositions of the staging of *Pests* intersect with an inheritance of ideology around pollution, infection, badness, prison and theatre, which continues to profoundly inform carceral society today. While Rolly and Pink burrow and lounge on the set, the set continues to decompose – mattresses slump and trash flutters. In *Pests* audiences do not *see* environments of prison, or the street and carparks where sex work and assault occur. They see only the interior of a putrefied nest, and it is this nest, with its gaping, punctured, ill-defined, and totally unprotected edges, which both transmits and mediates a carceral atmosphere.

20 Pink experiences hallucinations, which seep across the stage in bright red or crackling white digital projections. The stench of cheap cologne wafts across stage, causing Pink

to retch with the memory of the men who raped her while she was in local authority care as a child. The set hosts these episodes, but it also creates them, articulating seepages, trash-guts, and visions as another wasted body on stage; described by one critic as "the architectural equivalent of an anatomical écorché … instead of a flayed body, veins on show, we are looking at a flayed house" (Brennan, 2014). The set *as* a corpse-host-pit, from which smells, sights and sounds emanate as assaults, generates a pestilential cartography limned by walls that entrap rather than protect.

21 Miasmas are perceived through the air – through smell of rot, fogs, and other atmospheric events – and in some ways they *are* air. But they were not always considered *of* the air; instead they were indications of something disease-ridden that lingered forever on the periphery, ready to interlope. In late 18th to late 19th century Europe and America, "[m]iasma theory did not simply conceptualize air as a vehicle for the *transmission* of disease; rather, … miasmata were understood to actively mediate the atmosphere" (Waples, 2015, p. 22). Aspects of the unknown in the atmosphere infiltrated the body, making one's own body stranger than the atmosphere itself. Opacities, suspicions, and an impossibility of knowing: these factors are at the core of Pink's experience within *Pests*, as her nest becomes infiltrated by hallucinations at moments she does not anticipate. Importantly, Rolly can not see these hallucinations, although the audience can; as such, the body of Pink and her nest, extend into an uncontrollable, suspicious body shared with and imposed upon the audience as the projections seep across the auditorium to the stage. Pink's walls are permeable, and she experiences them as living, mutable and transgressed borders:

> PINK *sits, she turns and stares at the wall. Blood trickles down it. She gets up. She gets a piece of newspaper and packing tape from the side and sticks the paper over it. It seeps through. She gets another sheet and does the same. It seeps through. She gets another. And again and again until it is covered. She sits down. A long time. She looks at ROLLY's bag. She turns to look at the nest. She looks over at the paper. Blood seeps through.* (Franzmann, 2014, p. 44)

22 The deterioration of Pink's nest helps the audience to experience prison and the criminal justice system as an assemblage of performing materials, among them stone and electricity; prison vans and shackles; stacks of paper, court orders and love letters; but also other actants of the criminal justice system: the giant fabric of law, and rats, who as vermin crossing borders undermine a bedrock cultural trifecta of health, decency and containment.

23 The materiality of the stage set, in its refusal to protect Pink, threatens her, terrorizes her, causes her to hide in piles of trash. Penetrated by knives, assailed by electricity and blood, the deterioration of Pink's walls embodies the violation of boundaries experienced by women in the criminal justice system, the majority of whom are victims of violent crime, domestic and sexual abuse themselves (Women in Prison, 2020). If knives enter Pink's nest from just outside, do they come from the audience? Or as projections cross the audience, are we inside the nest with Pink and Rolly? We become exposed to what Ben Anderson terms "affective atmosphere": "a class of experience that occurs before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in-between subject/object distinctions" (Anderson, 2009, p. 78). A decomposing wall, a wall made atmospheric and disaggregated, through which knives slice and projections of blood drift, positions the audience within Pink and Rolly's shifting identity formation and dissolution. Yet the audience remain in position as spectators of proscenium theatre: an audience of subjects surveilling Pink and Rolly.

This both articulates and confuses the surveillance cultures of carceral society, conjuring the material experience of prison and its atmospheric aftermath in relationship to how, when, and if a state-enforced criminal identity is allowed to disappear, post-release.

Decomposition and subversion within miasmatic atmosphere

24 Within this decomposing set, Pink and Rolly become identified with literal waste and as wasted lives, bringing an urgency to the social waste-making processes that create slow and fast death in the UK (Bauman, 2004; Wacquant, 2009). From within our contemporary period defined by consumption and the production of rubbish, modern statecraft creates the conditions for certain humans to be defined as superfluous excess, considered redundant and no longer functional in society; prisons present themselves as prime sites for the disposal of "wasted lives" (Bauman, 2004). Because *Pests* depicts this zone as a spillage beyond containment, it carries a miasma aesthetic; yet where it goes further, calling on an awareness within the audience of the force of government as an operative of a collectively held, and deeply embedded, cultural imaginary, it becomes miasmatic performance.

25 In *Pests* these processes of miasmatic decomposition correlate to applied theatre scholar Jenny Hughes's concept of *critical mimesis*: "a practice of performance that materializes protective and habitable worlds in which life might encounter its own decay, whilst also securing itself in the world" (Hughes, 2011, p. 22). Hughes applies thinking around decomposition and decay to the performance of waste and "waste populations" in times of crisis, theorizing a "critically mimetic" performance register, which can expose the function that performance has in upholding social processes of consumption, beautification, and disposal of waste. For Hughes, critical mimesis must resist the potentialities inherent to mimesis in performance, in which social "mortification and vivification" (*ibid*.) and are often allowed to exist as unexamined, or unpoliticised, processes.

26 It becomes important to the atmosphere under consideration here to note that though ruined landscapes and structural inequalities dominate the play, they also rot and falter. Decompositions happen on multiple levels of *Pests*: they occur through decomposing materiality of the wasted trash-corpse of the set, and they occur through representations of human subjectivity decomposed into life made verminous. These multiple decompositions operate as byproducts of a mimesis of the criminal justice system; yet this is a mimesis that advances a strategy for survival – if not by Rolly and Pink, in the fact that audiences have become interpellated into a scene of decay.

27 Conjuring decay through the pure, evanescent materiality of a performance is not always enough: as such in *Pests* the *representation* of waste on stage does not, of itself, overcome mimetic excesses and petrified projections of carceral conditioning. In Hughes's schematic, a mode of critical mimesis proceeds from "the coexistence of a theatre that enchants and vivifies with a theatre of atrocity" (*ibid*., p. 25), agitating processes of social decay and decomposition into a material encounter with waste narratives and wasted lives. When this can occur, the abjectification of certain spaces, bodies and ways of life brings productive tension to a sense between audience and

performers that it is possible to move through both predictable and unpredictable times of crisis "without interpersonal violence... in ways that protect rather than annihilate" (*ibid*., p. 28). *Pests* takes waste literally as an aesthetic, perhaps over and above what Hughes herself would expect in her call for "circulations of waste" (*ibid*.). This crucible of literal and cultural waste does not prevent it from becoming critically mimetic, however.

28 Through decomposition in critically mimetic mode, *Pests* draws on atmosphere to achieve a commentary on bodies and law, proposing a miasmatic re-distribution, a sensory overturning, of landscapes of biopower shared between human and animal. Despite references to their fur, pups and nests, Pink and Rolly are not rats; do not present as rats, figuratively; they are not rat-headed theriomorphs; they do not perform with rats (visibly to an audience, that is). Though they are not rats, Rolly and Pink are confusingly human; rattily human; other than human; and in fact, due to all of these categories, they come to occupy a kind of sub-human/sub-rat life made verminous. These ambiguities along a human-rat spectrum gesture to a murderous tradition in Western culture of aligning rat to human, human to rat, as criminal subhumans. A miasmatic subject position in *Pests* becomes a rat-human-waste-criminal event, a kind of *becoming-vermin* both decompositional and interspecial.

29 Within the festering wasteland of *Pests*, a rat-human vector enlivens centuries-old fears around interspecies contact and plague, as well as the relationship between vice, morality and carceral investments in "higher orders" of white heteropatriarchy. Such a pestilential environment represents the kind of zone frequently intervened into by governments motivated to rule through what Neel Ahuja terms *bioinsecurity* (Ahuja, 2016). Bioinsecurity describes interspecies interactions and transborder affiliations (cultural and physical) as policed and contained by security forces through an activation of colonial fears and reification of sets of biopolitical binaries: human/animal, alien/citizen, etc. Within the allegorical representations and verminous maneuvers of *Pests*, interspecial rat-human-waste-criminal events confront, and reside, within a domain routinely framed as a biohazard on political and cultural, as well as biological, levels.

30 In addition to the material putrefactions of the set, *Pests* articulates this biohazardous relationship via an intervention by a walk-on human character in Scene 7. This is the only moment in the play where two beings other than Rolly and Pink become visible on stage. One is a human social worker, and the other is a rat baby. It occurs when Pink and Rolly are in a good place together: they've decided to dream their way out of their difficulties. Rolly's pregnancy has almost reached full term, and in Scene 7, Pink is ready to concoct a new future together – she wants to become a fitness instructor, "Work at Gym Bollocks dot Com" (Franzmann, 2014, p. 57), and she gets Rolly excited about becoming a nurse at an aged care facility. "We ditch da gnaw, yeah? We go full-on clean an' we, both of us, both of us mind, be bleachy, yeah. Wipe clean, minty fresh, da both of us, both of us, yeah?" (*ibid*.). At this moment, in which a positive future seems almost tangible, a government intervention occurs. A social worker enters Pink's nest, approaches Rolly, lifts her shirt, and opens her belly.

31 Pregnant Rolly is delivered of her baby. I use this strange passive construction deliberately: the social worker reaches into her womb and removes a human-baby-sized rat. She leaves with it immediately. Rolly collapses. Her pup is the only morphically accurate figuration of a rat in the entire play, and it comes during a scene

that is about dreaming a life out of impoverishment, sex work and addiction. During the dream of an ordinary life, a rat is born – and simultaneously, the dream and the baby are taken away. The social worker, on stage for a minute or less, is the only "human" figure in the play. She makes a type of sovereign gesture: walk in; take the pup; walk out. In this sovereign humanness, she appears more beast than Pink or Rolly ever do. In articulations such as these *Pests* locks on the exclusionary power of identifying vermin as integral to securitizing governmentality in carceral states. Given Pink and Rolly's story of removal from their own parents – a story of rape and abuse in local authority care – being removed to care does not equate with protection for Rolly's pup; to the contrary, it represents the site of rape and violence.

32 Yet the complex significatory nexus proposed by the play, in which waste, rat, and human become conflated and ambiguous, signals a removal or a suspension of the audience's *right* to differentiate between rat and human. For Giorgio Agamben, the power to clearly differentiate between life forms – this is human, and this not; this is rat, and this not – represents the very core of sovereign power (Agamben, 1998, 2004). The juncture of rat-human in their shared social function *as vermin* however makes a point of how our collective carceral imaginary heavily mediates "the" criminal *as* a site of subject formation in a way similar to *the* rat – as sitting together in hazy relationship to distinctions between the literal and the figurative.[4] A vermin subjectivity therefore articulates what criminalization performs in society, in a way that stretches beyond what an unchallenged, presupposed human subjectivity alone could do.

33 In this regard, *Pests* creates atmospheres of embodiment that are not fixable by the audience, calling up a vacillation within the audience that is critically mimetic in its "identification and non-identification … shifting empirical and imagined realities, tangible materiality and fantastic pretense" (Hughes, 2011, p. 5). Such processes are themselves political in that, as Hughes notes, they decay "atrophied" subject positions in times of crisis; in so doing, they allow structural forces, such as biopower sustained by a collective carceral imaginary, to become observable. Pink and Rolly go further than portraying a double subjectivity (as humans, and then separately, as rats); instead, it is their excessively doubling, multiplying, subjectivity (human-rat-sister-rat-human-criminal-rat, etc) which moves them in and out of juridical order. Through this position of atmospheric and extralegal excess,[5] they demonstrate exclusionary zones at work within carceral society, reminding us that, as Ben Anderson suggests, atmospheres "are quasiautonomous… a kind of indeterminate affective "excess" through which intensive space–times can be created" (Anderson, 2009, p. 80). Within an impoverished wasteland on stage, this allows the audience a glimpse of how the anthropological machine draws on figurations literally – and how it imposes juridical order through systemic dehumanization, creating intensive carceral space-times. And as such, where *Pests* delivers characters in a slippage between human and animal, these characters live in a slippage between human and animal *and law*.

34 To break up and to divest power from the prison industrial complex, to destroy carceral regimes, requires new cognitive mappings in our relationship to the genre of the human. In part, offering a "disfiguration" of human agency itself supports this, as critical race scholar Alexander Weheliye writes:

> As modes of analyzing and imagining the practices of the oppressed in the face of extreme violence—although this is also applicable more broadly—resistance and agency assume full, selfpresent, and coherent subjects working against something or someone. …Why are formations of the oppressed deemed liberatory only if they

> resist hegemony and/or exhibit the full agency of the oppressed? What deformations of freedom become possible in the absence of resistance and agency? (Weheliye, 2014, p. 2).

35 I connect miasmatic performance to Weheliye's provocation here because it too hopes to describe how a productive tension between agency and subjection can cause indeterminate spaces to occur in the theatre, designating an infinite multiplicity and meaning beyond the human. These atmospheric multiplicities, in which the human is divested of an exclusive right to language, judgment and reason, could not be more critical to reconfiguring carceral regimes of power.

Seeping toward a "horizon of abolition"

36 As a studio space, the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court Theatre can take any kind of audience seating arrangement. For *Pests*, it was raked seating. Raked, row on row piled up, mirroring the rake of rotting mattresses on the stage. In the nest of the audience, I am tense with distress throughout. In the nest on stage, there are few comforts: no bed, no toilet; the plaster covering the pipework has fallen away. That doesn't stop Pink and Rolly from trying to control their circumstances. Inspired to give healthy living a shot, Pink brings home a juicer; Rolly does not know what it is or what it's for. After Pink explains "It juices shit":

> PINK *looks round. Finds a half-eaten pizza on a plate. She opens the juicer, scrapes off the tomato sauce and onions into the juicer. Looks at the solid result.* PINK *finds a half-drunk mug of tea. She adds this to the mix. Blitzes it. She finds a glass and pours the results into a glass.* (Franzmann, 2014, p. 54)

37 This action resulted in disgusted groans from the audience – a kind of euphoric nausea – each time I was in the audience. The actors don't really drink the concoction, but Pink might as well have been really juicing shit and chugging it. It is gross, of course, but it is also *incorrect* use. But then, none of the properties on stage are living up to their material purpose: the walls don't wall, the juicer doesn't juice, women are scurrying, and these incommensurabilities are impossible to ignore.

38 Things are not working right, and it's wrong, too, that this scenario should ever have occurred. Rolly and Pink should never have been imprisoned; but prison is not in any way the solution for any of the emotional, material or psychological problems that arise in *Pests*. How can theatre about prison, especially this theatre in directly addressing middle class audiences at establishment theatres, engage what US anti-prison activist and educator Mariame Kaba and others call "non-reformist-reform"? From a semiotic perspective, in eliminating prison from the staged world of the play, *Pests* in some ways offers an abolitionist strategy; reforming prisons and policing is never proposed by the play. "Abolition is a horizon", Kaba writes:

> I don't know a single [abolitionist] who doesn't support *some* reforms [to the prison industrial complex, in the meantime]. ... How do we think about reforms that don't make it harder for us to dismantle the systems we are trying to abolish? That don't make it harder to create new things? What are the reforms that are "non-reformist" that will help us keep moving towards the horizon of abolition? (Kaba, 2017, original emphasis)

39 Can carceral atmospheres help us in this movement towards abolition? If so, how? In this final section, I propose a subversive element of atmospheric seepage: in a miasmatic mode, carceral atmospheres work to detach prison from its phenomena, to

reveal the concept of "prison" and its relationship to policing by the audience, as a co-creative act.

40 There are no innocent bystanders in carceral society. We are already in this carceral atmosphere, both within and outside of *Pests*, in the sense that the conditions of carcerality co-opt multiple fields of social life; it is an entity through and within which we navigate. What miasmas provide is experience of something unusual, suspect, *incorrect* hanging around that works to re-agitate awareness of carceral atmosphere. *Pests* never attributes a single narrative cause to the miasma flowing about the place: an occlusion of past and present temporalities for Pink extends this scene into indefinite continuity, without resolution. Pink's continuity extends into the audience: when we groan with disgust, this is in full accordance with Pink's own feeling about her surroundings. Pink lets the audience know that for her, too, "It a plague pit. Da whole place is stink. Make me puke nestin' here" (Franzmann, 2014, p. 33). Franzmann writes in Pink's sense of smell at several points: "*PINK sniffs the air. Covers her nose and moves*... PINK. Can you smelt dat?" (*ibid*., p. 56). What Pink is smelling at these points is aftershave, and like the digital projections that Pink and the audience can see, the scent of aftershave arrives when Pink experiences anxiety or threat. As the play enters its last scenes, Pink's visual hallucinations are accompanied by sounds of men's voices, and their footsteps approaching. Franzmann's stage notes also designate "*A smell of aftershave*" at these points; her intention is that the audience smell what Pink smells, just as we see what she sees, during hallucinatory episodes. Yet Rolly, by contrast, cannot see, hear or smell these events (she never knows what Pink is talking about when she asks if she can smell that). That she is sensorially oblivious becomes a critical factor within this consideration of miasma: it both assigns the miasma to Pink but it *also* assigns it to the audience. The miasma of *Pests* cannot be reduced to a proscenium experience of Rolly and Pink's circumstances, in other words.

41 Through the miasma on the set of *Pests* a boundary between audience and performer decomposes. Flows of scents, smells and putrefactions effervesce as a mode of subverting dominant orders, and confounding a collective sense of hierarchy.[6] This occurs between performer and audience, as swirling miasmas disrupt the space of observer and observed. Where audiences become permeated by the rich tang of a tea and pizza smoothie; the pong of blood from psychotic hallucinations; where they are crammed with the effluvium of rapist aftershave; where audiences are bathed in a gummy scum of noun-heavy rat language: that is when, as Pink declares, "someting will float to da top, I bet" of the sewers of the human psyche, a something linked to new possibilities of kinship, animal-human relationalities, politics and performance. As a performance atmosphere, and as a carceral atmosphere, miasma itself is predicated on – indeed supremely relies upon – obfuscated, foggy referents, moving around in a stink of suspicions. Miasmatic performance deliberately evokes these mechanisms, slows them down, and scrutinizes carceral practices in which referents are allocated to a particular criminal causality.

42 Through these decays – materially of the set, figuratively within the vermin-life of Rolly and Pink, sensorially as bleeds between set and audience through scent, nausea, despair – audience and theatre become stratified within the same assemblage, one of extreme damage. It is, after all, "our" carceral fantasy. Yet within this, miasmatic overflows of trash, vermin and criminality in *Pests* become positive and hopeful acts, insofar as they meet Hughes's thinking around decomposition within applied theatre as

performing "important functions connected to the preservation and regeneration of life as well as its deterioration ... drawing attention to issues of survivability and provoking reflection about the social and political implications" (Hughes, 2011, p. 206). When from within their carceral function, audiences become enveloped by atmospheres that threaten the stability of the social field, these miasmatically decompositional atmospheres problematize the audience's sense-making capacity. When the imaginary of carcerality becomes suddenly and *locally* affective in the audience, is precisely the moment that prison environments can become imagined as gestural and atmospheric.

43 To return to Kaba's provocation to move toward the horizon of abolitionist, non-reformist-reform: the unique capacity of theatre to stage and rehearse carcerally activated (and activating) atmospheres positions it as a form through which to demonstrate how we may subvert and combat perceptions of the prison and the criminal justice system as fixtures in society. Confronted with a distended semiotic of waste(d) life – one predicated on a fantastical imaginary of women living in poverty – the sites of prison, care homes, as well as actions of rape and physical violence *not* portrayed on stage, come under critical inspection as sites of stable representation. As Rolly and Pink, already in a destabilised identity category as rat-women, fall apart, shoot up, disintegrate, "prison" becomes one of the only stable forces to prop up the world of the play. In order to support the decomposition occurring on stage, what constitutes "prison", "rape", "assault", and indeed the carceral function of "audience", must be continually recomposed, examined, and confronted. The authentic, violent reality of imprisonment as a means to allocate and remove humanness must also be examine, confronted, decomposed. The hope of this reconceived relationship is that carceral statecraft can be survived, if it is broken down like this into multiple parts. It is in these ways that *Pests* subtends and twists carceral conditioning in the audience within a miasmatic mode.

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NOTES

1. This article draws from and develops intersections of miasma and theatre in Clean Break's work as theorised in my PhD thesis, "Miasmatic Performance: Carceral Atmospherics in the Theatre of Clean Break" (McPhee, 2020b)

2. The field of carceral geography has been fundamental to theorizing the modes through which this seepage occurs. See Moran, Turner and Schliehe (2018) for a wide-ranging discussion on some of the approaches carceral geographers have taken to explore the social and spatial extensions of the carceral beyond the prison.

3. For discussions of other Clean Break productions from this period: McPhee (2019, 2020a); Walsh (2016, 2018).

4. For a discussion of this in relation to animal representation (however not criminal), see Colleen Boggs 2013, p. 36-37.
5. The position of animality is itself extralegal, argues Boggs, and thus "marks an excess that cannot be subsumed to that law, even though it occupies the position of its disavowed origin and supplement" (2013, p. 131).
6. Though beyond the scope of this article, these elements also engage Jon McKenzie's concept of the *perfumative* in performance (2001).

ABSTRACTS

In Vivienne Franzmann's *Pests* (Clean Break, 2014), two rat-women scamper around a putrefied "nest" of rotting mattresses. Written following residencies in women's prisons, Franzmann intended Pests to raise awareness on what imprisoned women frequently report as part of their lived experience: poverty; domestic violence and sexual assault; and childhoods spent in care. "It is brutal, but it is authentic," she says (Gentleman, 2014). The aftermath of prison becomes, in the carceral imaginary of *Pests*, intertwined with waste, disease and animality. In this, I suggest, it performs a miasma of dispossession and social exclusion. In this article I explore *Pests* as an example of what I call miasmatic performance. I investigate the aesthetics and politics of carceral atmospherics produced by this theatre, thinking through how they both elicit, and simultaneously confound, a collective desire to attribute a clear function to prison in society.

Pests (Clean Break, 2014), de Vivienne Franzmann, raconte l'histoire de deux femmes-rats qui courent autour d'un « nid » putréfié fait de matelas en décomposition. Écrit à la suite de résidences dans des prisons pour femmes, *Pests* était voulu par Franzmann comme une sensibilisation aux récits d'expériences souvent narrés par les détenues : la pauvreté, la violence domestique, les agressions sexuelles et les enfances passées en institution. « C'est brutal, mais c'est authentique » raconte-t-elle (Gentleman, 2014). Dans l'imaginaire carcéral de *Pests,* les conséquences de la prison se retrouvent liées aux rebuts, à la maladie et à l'animalité. Ainsi, comme nous le suggérons, cet imaginaire met en scène un miasme de dépossession et d'exclusion sociale. Dans cet article, nous explorons *Pests* comme un exemple de performance miasmatique. Nous étudions l'esthétique et la politique des atmosphères carcérales de cette pièce, avec en creux la façon dont elles explicitent et à la fois brouillent un désir collectif d'attribuer une fonction précise à la prison au sein de la société.

INDEX

Mots-clés: carcéralité, atmosphère, théâtre de prison, décomposition
Keywords: carcerality, atmosphere, prison theatre, decomposition

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