

Trespassing Physical Boundaries: Transgression, Vulnerability and Resistance in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995)

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Paula Barba Guerrero and Ana M^a Manzanás Calvo,
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and **Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz**

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Abstract: Sarah Kane's *Blasted* has been analyzed from various perspectives that address the layers of destruction it exposes. From the questioning of its title and meaning, to the unravelling of the protagonists' abusive relationship, the analyses have emphasized the depiction of vulnerability as the defining human trait that Jean Ganteau observes in contemporary British literature. However, a key aspect has been overlooked in the critical response to the play: for Kane vulnerability does not equal helplessness, but rather stands in opposition to it. Hence, this article concentrates on how *Blasted* formulates a new understanding of vulnerability that fits Judith Butler's later redefinition of such notion as a trigger for resistance. It argues that, facing gender-based trauma, Kane dismantles the conditions that allow for a patronizing configuration of vulnerability in space by relocating the victim to an actual battlefield. Following Sarah Bracke's conception of governmental security as resilient, the article explores Kane's multisided articulations of violence, vulnerability and trauma. It traces human relations as well as the literal rupture of space. From the hostile environment of a warzone, the notions of victimhood and fragility become rearticulated to undertake the responsibility of survival, questioning our passivity and ethical duties towards Others.

Paula BARBA GUERRERO and Ana M^a MANZANAS CALVO

The misguided understanding of vulnerability and resistance as antithetical terms sums up the critical dilemma at the heart of Kane's opera prima, *Blasted*. Set in an opulent hotel room in Leeds, the first half of the play explores the power dynamics of the gendered relationship between Ian—a white journalist in his forties who suffers from lung cancer, and Cate (his twenty-one-year-old, former girlfriend), a bond based on psychological abuse, physical assault, and female subjection. Filled with visceral images, torture, and raw depictions of abjection, the second half of *Blasted* rearticulates the initial local crisis and projects it onto the international arena, on an unidentifiable battlefield whose significance and argumentation are coded in the symbolic order of the play. Kane's harrowing drama thereby becomes representative of a theatre of "experiential quality," in which the action is not narrated, but submitted to the public so that they relive it (Biçer 81). Such emotional contagion disrupts the foundations of naturalism, transforming space into the catalyst that triggers the action, the unifying entity that connects the actors' and the audience's bodies. The violent scenes respond to a desire to deconstruct the social norms that society unquestionably accepts, such as the perception of vulnerability as limited agency. And because the undoing of social rules signifies that the feeling of security implicit in the privileged nations' discourse is false, it is not difficult to imagine that *Blasted's* premiere in 1995 was an absolute scandal, for it exposed British national insecurity, ambivalence, violence, and corporeality in a very aggressive manner. Kane's disclosure of human atrocities was deeply misunderstood as an immature attempt to shock the British public (Saunders 38). However, the play's ensemble represents the dangers of a society at risk unaware of its own precariousness and vulnerability. Thus, this paper aims to examine the disclosure of vulnerability as a tool to regain agency while attempting to deconstruct the pejorative connotations that revolve around this notion. Kane's explicit portrayal of trauma and abjection, which emphasizes the passivity of resilience, anticipates Butler's redefinition of vulnerability as resistance in "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance." This article presents the evolution of the female protagonist, a resilient individual who constantly bounces back to a system that is threatening to her, through the prism of Cathy Caruth's and Sigmund Freud's understandings of *trauma*, and Julia Kristeva's vision of *abjection*. The crude exposure of Cate's abject, traumatic neuroses becomes the trigger for a massive deconstruction of the naturalistic order, which enables her to embrace vulnerability in order to resist abuse, oppose the social powers she is acted on, and survive. In *Blasted*, Sarah Kane elaborates a new dramatic mode that rearticulates identity to liberate the audience from the burden of indifference, silence and repression. She does so by exposing the triangulation of the traumatic, the abject, and the vulnerable as a mechanism of resistance before Butler articulated her argument against traditional demarcations of frailty.

To unleash the power of vulnerability, Kane is aware of the need to first introduce her audience to the aspects of the contemporary world that they prefer to suppress. As a consequence, she decides to initially lull them into a naturalistic illusion that recreates a real-life situation with the unfulfilled promise of passive entertainment. Set in a hotel room—one of Marc Augé's non-places, *Blasted's* mise-en-scène incorporates several elements (such as a bathroom or a double bed) which, together with the naturalistic atmosphere, incite the spectator to unconsciously map out space according to familiar parameters. The audience relocates the scene to a domestic environment since the aforementioned elements have homely connotations. The recognition of familiar codes favors the spectators' empathic incorporation, for the dialectics between the inferred residential safe-space and the audience heightens their comfort, and mitigates the adaptation shock caused by Kane's revolutionary drama. Under the cover of familiarity, Kane also introduces discursive strategies that contribute to maintaining the false sense of security raised by the naturalistic stage. The protagonists seem to communicate with the casualness of an ordinary couple, which adds to the mental picture of the domestic safe-space: "I'm glad you've come. Didn't think you would," Ian says smiling, to which Cate answers "I was worried . . . You sounded unhappy," showing her concern for him through informal interaction (Kane, *Blasted* 4).

Nevertheless, Kane's initial desire for her audience to feel at ease is contradicted by a later set of symbolic traces that raise doubts on the reliability of the naturalistic scene, and call into question its ontological stability. As Aleks Sierz argues, playwrights rewrite the nation by means of metaphors "which reimagine reality" (241) and enable a re-reading of the symbolic order. Kane's metaphors become the first step of a gradual deconstruction of the social beliefs the audience holds and never questions. This undoing of assumptions is gradually reflected in space, as the naturalistic room gives way to a war zone. The clues that make this destructive progression possible appear either verbally, visually or acoustically to warn the audience (in a very indirect manner) about all the violence, shock, and destruction to come. For instance, in the apparently relaxed dialogue between the characters there are nuances that insinuate

an unbalanced command of the dramatic cosmos. Once they enter the room, Cate appears to be delighted and admires the place, whereas Ian undermines space claiming that he has "shat in better places" (Kane, *Blasted* 3). This initial difference illustrates the protagonists' divergent reactions towards space. For Cate, the hotel room represents a new environment that an unemployed and naïve young woman like her has not been able to experience before. For Ian, space is a material presence to conquer which he takes for granted and will contaminate throughout the play. Such deviation alerts the audience to the source of trouble in the play, a normative understanding of identity that reduces femininity to a corporeal commodity in the hands of masculine power.

Another source of symbolic hinting are the visual props that, in their transformation, contribute to meaning functioning as metaphors for actions (Saunders 42) that the spectator is invited to decipher. Therefore, the scattered bouquet of flowers spotted at the beginning of the second scene (a love token given to Cate) symbolizes in its destruction the violent expiration of Ian's seductive tactics that culminates in Cate's rape during the night. Ian's first sexual assault occurs off-scene and is only implied in the protagonists' conversation, in her symptoms of trauma, and through visual symbols. The flowers, the newspapers, the gun, the telephone, and the bottles of gin become fundamental tokens that infuse the dramatic action with significance, allowing the audience to grasp meaning as the play unfolds. Given Cate's unawareness of the dangers that a space colonized by masculinity conceals, the room becomes a prison in which she is vexed, dehumanized, and tortured. It is not difficult to imagine that the spectators might feel suspicious of the artifice hidden under the surface of familiarity, being their mistrust the key to dismantle the initial domesticity the play portrays.

The fracture of the feelings of protection in scene two becomes, under abusive circumstances, a trigger for the uncertainty that underlines the vulnerable conditions of the British nation-state. The intimate non-place of the hotel room mutates into the interpersonal national arena. The understanding of security shifts from the ability to protect oneself from a threatening impact, to the governmental capacity to minimize damaging effects in order "to preserve the integrity of a society, system or self" (Bracke 56). Security is therefore examined through the lens of naturalism, the representational system that perpetuates normative codes. Ironically enough, in *Blasted* naturalism contributes to underlining the risk that the current social structures undergo, and their need to redesign safety through the prism of resilience. Thus, national security is no longer a matter of exclusively preventing damage, but a tool to reverse harm by means of preparation, and by establishing planning as a way of protection. Because the characters belong within the borders of the home-like room (epitome of Britain), they feel safe from external threats while the symbolic order proves them wrong. The disruption of that false sense of security created by the setting vanishes gradually for the audience, as they realize the dangers that space conceals (especially for minority groups). Through the aforementioned array of verbal, visual, and acoustic signs (particularly the gun), the playwright not only presents the action, but also hints at the actual insecurity of the nation-state, and puts the audience *en garde*. These insinuations thus respond to a negative understanding of existence that disquiets the audience, for spaces and bodies in *Blasted* are unprotected and prone to be controlled, occupied, and infected by a violent, abject male.

For Kristeva abjection implies repulsion and social rejection; it is "a border" governed by ambiguity (*Horrors* 3-4) that relates infection to spatial entities, identifying bodies as the physical boundaries of xenophobia and sexism. *Blasted* presents abjection as a cyclic progression that stems from the characters' inability to embrace vulnerability. Thus, the notion of the abject goes beyond the disgusting appearance of the room—which is gradually stained, urinated, and occupied by Ian's defilement—to encompass a figurative rereading of nations and bodies as entities intertwined in their blight. The physical contamination of space should therefore be understood as a symbolic reflection of the body's disease which, as Ana M^a Manzanás and Jesús Benito suggest, "engages the body and the nation, as well as the intimate liaisons between each other" thus correlating the protagonists' and the nation-state bodies (*Cities* 76). The protagonists' corpora and the space they inhabit become an allegorical representation of Britain that exposes its precarity as opposed to the governmental discourse of security and well-being. To do so, Kane presents the dangers that refusing vulnerability entails in the figures of the perpetrator and his victim(s).

Because of his near-death state, Ian does not seem to care about his health, having indeed the intention of "enjoy[ing him]self while [he is] here" (Kane, *Blasted* 12). Hence, carelessness regarding the room's cleanliness becomes an outer image of the self. However, the connection between his sexist/racist comments and his corporeal decadence is only understandable if read within the framework of abjection. It has already been argued that the alien body is abject by definition, for its physical differences are a border that marks and undermines the self. And because of Ian's disease, his body becomes socially reconfigured as a site for abjection. In *Blasted* the abject is represented as something

or someone that "stinks" (4). That is the way Ian refers to his own body. His perception of his physical decrepitude stems from a split conception which divides the self into the essence of the person (the psyche), and a disposable partner, the body. Such humanist definition of the individual à la Descartes (Spambalg-Berend 106-7) enables Ian's understanding of his body not as himself, but almost as a burden, whose defects he has to amend. Ian's recognition of his own wretchedness is therefore only plausible because of his masculinist perception of vulnerability and the abstraction of the Other, by which the subaltern becomes objectified. Ian's extreme rejection of fragility is the direct outcome of a masculinist account of dominion to avoid power deprivation, according to which "if nothing acts on me against my will or without my advanced knowledge, then there is only sovereignty, the posture of control over the property that I have and that I am" (Butler, "Rethinking" 24). Having baths then becomes a controlled ritual that allows him to purify himself so as to remain fit to exercise control. Still, the deteriorating condition of his diseased body serves as a reminder of his own limitations, which counterbalances the hierarchy he upholds.

In *Precarious Life* Butler proposes a human interrelation based on the vulnerability of bodies. She presents frailty as a commonplace for humanity that enables us to "see that the national border was more permeable than we thought" (20, 39). Since we perceive permeability as vulnerability, our reaction is to seek security away from the alien invader, and to recognize our own vulnerability as an abject category that should be rejected in order to maintain a position of power. Defection thus becomes a global(izing) feature that disrupts the ambiguity of the abject, as it stops being a border to become a shared trait. To this abrupt rupture in the understanding of vulnerability, Ian responds combatively refusing to identify himself with the subaltern for she/he lacks the agency the perpetrator aims to maintain. Thus, the Other is dehumanized to sustain the social powers that oppress her/him.

In *Blasted*, Ian's coping mechanism adopts the form of black humor as the means to reinstall hierarchy because, as Terry Eagleton maintains, the comic "confronts us with our finitude without terrorizing us with it" (73). Humor allows Ian to constantly ridicule the vulnerability of the Other. Since he cannot articulate his body as a flawless entity, Ian discredits the anatomy of others by means of racism and sexism, enabling abjection to emerge not only in the form of a degraded mise-en-scène, but also as a significant characteristic of humanity. Accordingly, displeasing human odor can be read as the physical manifestation of repressed (but resistant) vulnerability that, rejected by the positions of power, becomes traumatizing and shameful. In his denial, Ian recalls Jean Ganteau's assessment of vulnerability through Paul Ricoeur's borrowed term of "vulnerable judgement" (4). Following this premise, the more invulnerable Ian considers himself to be, the more fragile he is. In short, the rejection of the damaged body as a defining feature of the individual relates to an inability to accept the vulnerable within oneself, a notion clearly related to trauma suppression that results in violence and transgression.

Connected to the external forces that seem to endanger the set, acoustic symbols connote the looming menace of a malign entity that threatens the room's order, thus recalling the perception of the migrant as a threat and a source of infection. In *Blasted*, minorities are perceived as abject, for they are dehumanized and mocked, but also feared. As Manzananas and Benito argue in another context, the rise of different epidemics "has reinforced xenophobic notions of foreign-ness as inherently threatening and diseased" (84), an understanding of the Other as a threat to the social order. In *Blasted* existence is presented at risk to signify the dangers looming in the internalized foundations that sustain an unfair system. Ian's connection of the odor in the city with the presence of "Wogs and Pakis" is evoked by the "knock[s] on the door" (performed by the black room-service waiter) as a reminder of that foreign threat seeking to invade the protagonists' apparent sanctuary (Kane, *Blasted* 4, 34-36). Yet, even if the protagonists become afraid of the exterior to the extent of paranoia, the minority groups in Leeds remain invisible in the play, muzzled, without a voice, and reduced to labor. Their hazards are limited to a disclosure of fragility, exploitation, and precariousness that highlights the irrational fright of the protagonists. The conception of the "dangerous" outside (28) thus resonates as a device to oppose the equalizing value of vulnerability because of a desire to define oneself as agentic, and to benefit from the political denotations that come with it (Butler, "Rethinking" 23).

Since the characters decide to be autonomous, they defy vulnerability to remain distanced from the oppressed Other, frightened by its invasion. Their fearful response, explored by Freud as an expectable answer to war trauma (*Pleasure* 6), compels the audience to question the identity of the mysterious invader and to repossess fear, since the sudden realization of insecurity within the nation-state becomes traumatizing for the audience as well. The protagonists' terror also anticipates the thematic transformation of the stage into a war zone, connecting both the outside and the inside threats for, as Kane argues, "the wall between so-called civilization and what happened in central Europe is very, very thin [and] can be torn down at any time" (Rebellato). Hence, *Blasted* becomes a recreation of British

social life, which epitomizes the sense of national safety as Bracke's resilient security, and presents the mistaken dualism between the safe home and the pervasive vastness of war. In doing so, the stage becomes a mimetic reduction of the nation that promotes the unlearning of normative codes. In *Blasted*, the outside mirrors the inside, blaming the social codes that govern the local panorama for the atrocities unfolding outside the nation-state, and the unnoticed violence (such as sexual assault or racism) happening within. Kane's strategy is therefore based on close observation of a microcosm, stratifying meaning and encoding it into symbols for the audience to identify the dilemmas of their own existence. The fourth wall thus becomes a mirror where the spectators are expected to recognize common elements and empathize with the protagonists' uncertainty. As the play unfolds, the audience realizes that the apparent safety of the "very expensive hotel room" is feigned, and that the protagonists have been left adrift in an unpredictable space, forced to become resilient (Kane, *Blasted* 3).

Despite its extensive usage, resilience remains an ambiguous term that "holds the promise of an answer" to the "array of potentially devastating threats" which the dominant, social trends have created, and which societies ought to face nowadays (Boin, Comfort and Demchak 1-2). However, such response is not always favorable to those who live in precarious conditions, as it enables their survival by adhering to specific codes that preserve their inferiority. Hence, these fragile selves are encouraged to oppose their vulnerability, seeking to remain strong enough to be able to return to a previous state. The understanding of traumatic recovery as "bouncing back" (Bracke 54) implies an impossibility to reverse precariousness because, even if the traumatic sequence is overcome, the causes that produced such circumstance in the first place remain unchanged. In Bracke's words, resilience "notoriously condemns its inhabitants to live in uncertainty" (57), enabling them to become aware of their dependence upon a failing institution that does not protect them. Resilient characters are conditioned by their personal inaction, transforming their bodies into passive commodities. This definition of the self, which falls close to Ricoeur's concept of the ethical subject as a passive, suffering being (qtd. in Ganteau 13), can only be overcome by means of *mobilizing vulnerability*. Being vulnerable is thus understood as acting towards better life conditions (Ganteau 13; Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability" 21) as opposed to adopting resilience and becoming passive. The vulnerable/resilient dichotomy is explored in *Blasted* in the character of Cate, who keeps bouncing back to the starting point of her meeting with Ian despite his constant abuse, remaining resilient to a repeated, in crescendo aggression that subjects her to her perpetrator's dominion, and that will last until Cate embraces vulnerability at the end of the second scene.

In *Blasted*, the rigid demarcation of gender roles and the subordinate position of women derives from an immobile definition of vulnerability related to feminine powerlessness and inaction. The initial inability to work from vulnerability is manifest in a wide range of atrocities committed by a hidden masculine violence that is always relegated to the private sphere. Thus, the presence of Cate's symptoms of sexual abuse (such as sucking her thumb, talking with stutter or fainting) before Ian inflicts pain upon her become representative of the previous sexual violence that Cate attempts to repress. Since the memories associated with her father's return seem to trigger her symptoms, it seems plausible to think of Cate as a child victim of incest. The connection of her trauma with her childhood opens up the dialogue for the audience to reassess the horrors that social powers impose on those labeled as weak. And, even if it seems difficult to recognize that an apparently democratic and safe public sphere coexists with private instances of "primitive autocracy," Kane aims to trespass the boundaries of normativity to expose rape as the "life-threatening event" it is for the victim (Herman 28, 31).

The allegorical significance we can infer from Cate's abuse as a child presents her compulsions as a return to a child-like state in which Cate's naïveté turns her dependent on her perpetrators to be fed, nurtured, and protected from the so-called exterior menace. As Adriana Cavarero suggests, it is in the figure of the infant that both vulnerability and helplessness become intrinsically intertwined, for the child's inevitable dependence on inter-relationality to survive implies a powerless state of endangerment (*Horrorism* 30). The suppression of agency from the moment of her implied abuse as an infant stalls Cate's progression and development, which makes her even more dependent on others to ensure her survival. With no job and living with her mother, Cate seems to be stuck on an embryonic phase of adulthood that, together with her childlike innocence, makes her the perfect victim for a sadistic perpetrator like Ian.

The reason why Cate remains resilient and does not leave the room is therefore established by the father/daughter relationship, mimicked in the abuse of her body (Saunders 69). As Ian becomes the paternal figure in the room, Cate is forced to accept the domestic sphere as a safe space, and thus endorse violence, bouncing back to reenact the cycle of abuse and trauma for as long as the master fancies. Her blind acceptance of this distribution of power could also be an indicator of a previous abuse

committed by Ian himself when Cate was younger (Buse 179). Thus, the extreme insecurity to which Cate is exposed in *Blasted* epitomizes the real conditions of rape victims, ignored and hidden in the private sphere of home/national safety. *Blasted*, anticipating Cavarero's concept of *horrorism* a decade before it got published, changes the subject to tell horrific (hi)stories from the victim's viewpoint, discerning a new ontology of vulnerability and violence (86-87).

To alleviate and ease her distress, Cate displays a variety of compulsive tendencies symptomatic of her "attempted avoidance of unpleasurable conflict" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 60). In the form of traumatic neuroses, the aftermath of her trauma relates to a suppression of corporeal abjection, for "the body is at center of Kane's comic tendencies" (Urban 153). Because Cate's body, infected by her perpetrators' fluids, underlines her corporeal imperfection, the repression of its deviation hides a desire to remain agentic. To reaffirm political agency, Cate ignores the patriarchal power dynamics of the room and lulls herself into thinking that she is not vulnerable or in a precarious condition. Her self-induced agency appears in the play as an instance of dramatic irony, since her myopic attempt to restore normality is evident for the audience. Thus, resilience appears as a mechanism to cope with violence and to bounce back from trauma in order to downplay *Blasted's* crisis. Her urge not to look vulnerable results in a series of symbolic, linguistic, and physical breakdowns that splits her identity and sharpens her distress. It has already been argued that Ian's abject self-deprecation is contingent upon his perception of the self as dual, which allows him to elude vulnerability and its political implications. Yet, for Cate, Cartesian dualism appears as the outcome of trauma, breaking her tortured self into the incarnation of her consciousness (her psychic self), and her typified body (which tries to ignore trauma and undergoes abuse). Therefore, it can be argued that because of the materiality enforced upon femininity, her body assumes a sexed, cultural meaning (Butler, *Gender* 6) that runs against her "friendly" and "non-sexual" childlike identity (Kane, *Blasted* 5).

The sexualization of the female body thus presupposes the desirability and sexual arousal of Cate, given that she is expected to act as a sexual object. When analyzing adult contemporary violence, Cavarero suggests that whereas vulnerability responds to the victim's persistent state of exposure, helplessness only occurs in punctual (calculated) circumstances, when the figure in control inflicts deliberate pain on the objectified Other, now perceived as a mere "suffering body" (31). Cate's sexual objectification thus respond to "a series of acts, intentional and planned [by Ian], aimed at bringing" these two categories together on the passive body of Cate by means of torture, abuse and rape (31), a fact that further splits her fissured identity.

The dualism between an objectified Cate and her traumatized consciousness is literally performed by means of unconscious metaperformances. For instance, the first time that Cate falls into one of her seizures, her conscious mind aims to forewarn her about the dangers that private space conceals. The impossibility to communicate with her physical self underlines her split, and shows the audience Kane's desire to prepare them for the violence that is yet to come:

Cate begins to tremble. Ian is laughing.

Cate faints.

Ian stops laughing and stares at her motionless body.

Ian: Cate?

. . .

Cate (Bursts out laughing, unnaturally, hysterically, uncontrollably.)

Ian: Stop fucking about.

Cate (Collapses again and lies still.)

Ian stands by helplessly

After a few moments, Cate comes around as if waking up in the morning.

Ian: What the Christ was that?

Cate: Have to tell her.

Ian: Cate?

Cate: She's in danger.

(She closes her eyes and slowly comes back to normal.

She looks at Ian and smiles.)

Ian: What now?

Cate: Did I faint?

Ian: That was real?

Cate: Happens all the time. (Kane, *Blasted* 9)

Introduced as a regular action in which the grotesque and the supernatural merge with the naturalism of the scene, the interference of Cate's unconsciousness rearticulates her dream-like seizures as the

entrance to a (u)topos where she feels at ease. As opposed to Freud (*Pleasure* 7) and Caruth's (*Unclaimed* 59) understandings of nightmares as the medium to return to a traumatic dystopia, Kane represents Cate's blackouts as a release of tension into an empty, utopic threshold that disrupts the scientific experiencing of time. Such (u)topos therefore unfolds into what Henri Bergson calls *real duration*, an intuitive grasp of temporality experienced in its mobility (*Creative* 166). It could be argued that such utopic non-place stands for the place of femininity, and that such locus does not exist in the reality of the nation.

Besides, after coming back from her mental outage, Cate smiles at her perpetrator, bouncing back to start the traumatic sequence all over. The dehumanization of the abject body (either female or colored) thus responds to a hegemonic design of the stage that conflates normative codes while exposing the Other as an abstraction. Because Ian perceives Cate as a material entity with which he cannot empathize, the pain that she undergoes due to his abuse turns invisible for him. Hence, oppression becomes a game hidden under the cloak of black humor because, as Bergson maintains, when one surrenders to indifference, tragedy becomes comedy (*Laughter* 5), a cruel application of humor that demands a reaction from the audience, who feels compelled to reassess their beliefs.

Hence, Ian's apathetic responses to suffering emphasize the tragic existence of an individual labeled as vulnerable, for the weak and wretched are assumed to be unable to fully operate. Sarah Ablett suggests that Ian's indifference echoes the incapacity of the media culture to oppose violence, as its retellings and procedures display violent traces (65). When Ian narrates the rape and slaughter of Samantha Scarce, the spelling out of her surname deconstructs her humanity and identity, transforming her into an abstraction to entertain an indifferent reader. This detached experience of trauma is counterbalanced by the theatrical performance of rape, in which Ian abuses Cate's body while she lies unconscious. The aseptic approach to human tragedy in the media is therefore undone by Kane's drama. *Blasted* offers vistas into human emotions, where violence can be examined through the prism of empathy, rather than simply assessed from the indifferent commentaries of a journalist/perpetrator like Ian. Hence, the transgression of the physical boundaries in Cate's sexual assault represents the absolute collapse of her ontological stability, an emotional and psychic breakdown tantamount to her unlearning of social codes and the rise of her vulnerable identity as a forceful asset:

She faints.

Ian goes to her, takes the gun and puts it back in the holster.

Then lies her on the bed on her back.

He puts the gun to her head, lies between her legs, and simulates sex.

As he comes, Cate sits bolt upright with a shout.

Ian moves away, unsure what to do, pointing the gun at her from behind.

She laughs hysterically, as before, but doesn't stop

She laughs and laughs and laughs until she isn't laughing any more, she's crying her heart out.

She collapses again and lies still. (Blasted 27)

Cate's uncontrollable laughter becomes "an affirmation of nothingness" (Urban 166) representative of her final recognition of resilient inaction. Unlike the social gesture that humor is for Bergson (*Laughter* 20), the audience in *Blasted* realizes that "laughing is, in fact, a cruel matter" (Urban 166), and that action should be taken against the passivity enforced upon vulnerable bodies. For Cate, laughing becomes the physical manifestation of a breakdown—later mirrored in the disruption of the naturalistic scene—leading her to reassess her identity. Cate's "dianoetic laugh" ("the laugh that laughs at unhappiness") therefore rises in direct opposition to Ian's black humor, which opens up the ethical possibilities of *Blasted* for the spectator (Urban 165-66).

The deconstruction of vulnerability as agency-deprivation culminates in Cate's dianoetic laughter. Her laughter, however, originates in *melancholia*, in the violent outbursts prior to this scene. Freud suggests that the split ego undergoes a melancholic loss of an ideal kind that, as a result of affliction, redirects the negative emotions towards the victim ("Mourning" 245-46). Yet, in *Blasted*, melancholia "hides an aggressivity against the lost object" and reveals ambivalence regarding the object of mourning (Kristeva, "Melancholic" 6). Cate's violent outbursts after her implied rape during the night (such as the destruction of Ian's jacket or their fight on the bed) represent her traumatic ambivalence towards loss that, as a sign of her vulnerability, is redirected against her perpetrator and his possessions. Melancholia is reclaimed not as passive manifestation of self-harm, but as a step towards recovery of agency through ambiguity and rage. Given that, in her fits, Cate is able to access the (non-)place of the subaltern—which is relegated to an offstage (u)topos that gives the victim pause, it seems feasible to argue that the usurpation of that invisible space will result in extreme emotional instability for the victim,

as she would not feel invulnerable even in the confines of utopia. Therefore, to avoid further harm, Cate would force herself to redefine her identity as vulnerable.

Cate's desperation after her unconscious body is raped triggers the destruction of the naturalistic setting. Her despair blasts space and relocates the room to a war zone, mirroring the actual war between the sexes that begins the minute Cate embraces her vulnerable condition as a tool for reversal. Hence, vulnerability becomes active resistance against rape, a form of warfare that she had not fought before. Having trespassed Cate's corporeal and emotional boundaries with his fluids, Ian distances himself from her body to demand her to have a bath. His perception of Cate as a dehumanized commodity infected by his abjection clarifies the extreme brutality that naturalism, patriarchy and resilient behaviors can project on the Other. The act of bathing is however the first instance of *agonic agency* that Cate displays in *Blasted* (Gambetti 31), which allows her to escape from Ian's influence (Saunders 44) because her identity is no longer split. Cate epitomizes political resistance in her mobilization of vulnerability which, as Butler mentions, is a way of being "exposed and agentic at the same time" (Butler, "Rethinking" 24). In turn, naturalism (and the dogmatic rules that sustain it) collapses into a battlefield where the biases of the contemporary world and the detrimental outcomes of violence are exposed for analysis. Ablett contends that the minute the war breaks out between the couple, hostility permeates space, enabling Cate to see war through the window (66). Vulnerability thus becomes "a space to work from and not only something to overcome" (Hirsch 337), a site from which and into which social biases can be examined and undone.

Because of Ian's inability to empathize with Cate's suffering, Kane relocates the play to a war zone in which Ian and his violent attitudes are duplicated in the Soldier's persona. In this warlike scenario, sex literally becomes "another form of specialized violence," used as a weapon to subdue (Armstrong 62-63). Just as Cate was regarded as a mere body to be colonized, in the battlefield setting the tables are turned and Ian is to be abused. Hence, the Soldier becomes the vehicle to make Ian comprehend the damage he has inflicted upon Cate, for the Soldier's precariousness is the large-scale outcome of Ian's abuse of Cate (Saunders 46). By means of fear, dominion, mutilation and rape, the Soldier reenacts his dead girlfriend's assassination upon Ian's ravaged body, thus replicating Ian's rape of Cate. The extreme exposure of violence builds *narrative vulnerability*, which triggers the spectators' emotions and empathy (Ganteau 140) to expose the rape culture while dissecting the causality of the events. Vulnerability is therefore examined as a "socially induced condition," that exposes how human interrelations affect or impinge on us (Butler, "Rethinking" 25).

After the Soldier is dead and the hotel room destroyed by an explosion, Cate returns with a baby that soon dies to find a disabled Ian lying next to the corpse of the Soldier. The accumulation of horror in the second part of the play underlines the necessity of vulnerable characters to use survival tactics in order to stay alive. Cate's final pragmatism in trading herself sexually for food therefore becomes a conscious submission to trauma that short-circuits fearful compliancy with paternalistic power. Instead, it mobilizes vulnerability as active political resistance. Hence, even if Cate is being hurt by an oppressive system, it is in her exposed vulnerability that she finally resists the norms of the paternalistic institutions that undermined her, exposing the system's fragility (Butler, "Rethinking" 22). The unfairness of such panorama is exposed in front of Ian and the audience, who become unwilling witnesses to the reality they are perpetuating and which they can no longer rationalize, becoming thus victims, perpetrators, and bystanders of a violence that is inherent to the social hierarchy they sustain (Felman, "Education" 15; Kane, *4.48 Psychosis* 22).

The playwright's final didactic decision, which resides in *Blasted's* "refusal to tell and its compulsion to show" (Waters 379) encourages a rereading of tragedy as negative utopia, which "reminds us of what we cherish in the act of seeing it destroyed," exposing our finitude as defeat and glory since that which destroys us is our free spirit in objectified form (Eagleton 26, 122). Hence, *Blasted's* final scene stands for a moment of compassion in which Cate's return and Ian's final thanking signifies the distancing from "the current cycle of revenge" to impersonate interrelatedness and community (Butler, *Precarious* 10). In the end, it is by deprivatizing and reclaiming the political spaces that label and (b)order the protagonists according to unfair social norms that identity is exposed as a malleable turmoil of emotions and thoughts able to defeat its political purpose. Judith Herman argues that in moments of crisis, our basic human relationships are questioned (51), raising the ethical dilemma of how to behave. Seeking a reformulation of the vulnerable self and the hostile places she/he inhabits, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* explores the vulnerable body of characters and nations as sites for resistance which, in their interconnectedness with other frail entities, flourish, become nurtured, and survive.

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