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Clean Break: a practical politics of care

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Clean Break, founded in 1979 by two women serving sentences in an English prison, has developed over the last four decades into an influential theatre, education and advocacy organisation, positioning narratives of women affected by the criminal justice system centre stage. In this chapter, Joan Tronto's work on care, markets and justice ([1993] 2009, 2013) informs my reading of Clean Break's organisational practices as care. From its distinctive approach to developing new writing for theatre, to its enduring commitment to reach audiences through partnerships with criminal justice, cultural and voluntary sector organisations, Clean Break creates structures of care for women who have fallen beyond the reach of state systems of welfare: the subjects of stigma, regulation and punishment. In this chapter, I argue that Clean Break not only critiques the intersectional oppressions that shape the lives of many women who experience the criminal justice system but, through its responsive and interconnected practices, attends to a care deficit in society, integral to the company's commitment to equality and justice.

A radical articulation of care

In *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* ([1993] 2009), Joan Tronto argues for a reconsideration of care as a central rather than peripheral concern to society, a valuable moral and political concept that, through practice, engenders social equality and justice. Tronto's earlier work with Berenice Fisher establishes caring as central to our lived experience, 'a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' ([1993] 2009: 40). In this context, care is a practice (a process you do) rather than a disposition (a way you feel), upon which we are all interdependent. However, in a world where autonomy and independence is valued more than negotiation, collaboration and *interdependence*, care is sidelined and

devalued. It is relegated as 'women's work', firmly positioned in the realm of the domestic and hidden, rather than the public and visible, a site with little agency and even less power. In a neoliberal world that values productivity and the free movement of goods in global markets, ideas of care are discredited ideologically and economically: relational acts of caregiving – parenting, looking after friends and family members who are living with long-term illnesses, disability or the effects of age – are under-recognised contributions to society. In the case of the UK, where the state may issue a carer's allowance, carers often find themselves discredited and viewed as an economic drain on society, despite the fact that their hidden work saves the government over £123 billion a year on health and social care (Carers UK, 2015). Additionally, as Tronto notes, where care work is paid, it is often gendered, raced and classed and that 'those who are least well off in society are disproportionately those who do the work of caring, and that the best-off members of society often use their positions of superiority to pass caring work off to others' ([1993] 2009: 113). This marginalisation and devaluing of care work further facilitates the construction of 'otherness' – of both the carer and cared for – through power and privilege.

Tronto disaggregates the idea of care from women's work and women's morality and repositions this species activity that maintains, continues and repairs the world as a 'care ethic' – something to be foregrounded and valued as part of the collaborative, processual act of society. A centralising of the value of care, of care ethics, would, she argues, enable societies to reframe and envision the world differently, 'so that the activities that legitimate the accretion of power to the existing powerful are less valued, and the activities that might legitimate a sharing of power with outsiders are increased in value' (Tronto, [1993] 2009: 20). This radical rethinking about the relationship between care and justice, equality and power exposes the limited reach of government policy addressing social injustice. Clean Break's theatre practice *with* women affected by social inequality, and the work it does around consciousness raising through theatre *about* the enduring structural inequalities that shape their experience is, I argue, a political, social and cultural intervention that breeches this gap. Fisher and Tronto's identification of the elements of care offers a pertinent framework with which to examine Clean Break's nuanced, robust and responsive practice: 'caring about, noticing the need to care in the first place; taking care of, assuming responsibility for care; care-giving, the actual work of care that needs to be done; and care-receiving, the response of that which is cared for to the carer' (1990: 127). In her later work, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality and Justice* (2013), Tronto expands this framework to include, 'caring with', arguing that 'caring needs and the ways in which they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all' (2013: 23). To think about care beyond primary, dyadic care relations offers an opportunity to think about how care functions socially and politically in a culture. This is imperative when considering societal perception of and political response to women with experience of the criminal justice

system. These are women who are often reduced and delimited through stigma, shame and regulation as ‘bad girls’: contributors to society’s problems rather than individuals whose lives are disproportionately affected by social injustice. Cast as such, these women are deemed, individually and collectively, beyond care.

Beyond care? Women, criminal justice and criminalisation

The prison population continues to soar. At the time of writing, more than eleven million people are incarcerated across the globe. There is a considerable body of research detailing the political and economic imperatives for this phenomenon (Coyle *et al.*, 2016; Mauer, 2016). The rise in crime and sentencing reflects an expansion in the number of human behaviours identified as unlawful (particularly in relation to technology and immigration) and greater state intervention by policing and judicial bodies. Despite the democratic ideal that everyone is equal before the law, in the USA and UK particularly, there is a disproportionate percentage of the prison population who experience social inequality through their experience of poverty, racism and limited social mobility (Mauer, 1999). Wacquant highlights the interrelationship between poverty and punishment in neoliberal societies. He argues that in neoliberal states, ‘welfare and criminal justice are two modalities of public policy toward the poor’ and that ‘the linked stinginess of the welfare wing and munificence of the penal wing under the guidance of moralism are profoundly injurious to democratic ideals’ (Wacquant, 2011). While Wacquant evidences his argument with specific reference to the USA, the fundamental issues about the punitive regulation of those who live in poverty is also evident in countries whose actions reveal an increased deployment of incarceration as punishment, despite successive governments’ rhetoric to tackle crime and reduce it: countries like the UK, where the work of managing and administering the state business of punishment is, increasingly, carried out by private companies in a global corrections industry. These companies’ escalating profits show little sign of diminishing as governments continue to find funds in the name of security at a time of aggressive cutbacks in health, education and social care (Stern, 2006; Garland, 2018).

The feminisation of poverty (Bradshaw, 2002) and the elision between welfare policy and penal policy means that women are particularly vulnerable to political forces of regulation and punishment. Globally, women make up less than 10 per cent of the prison population, and the vast majority of crimes they commit are non-violent, resulting in short-term sentences (Kennedy, 1993; Gunnison and Bernat, 2016). It is most significant that the characteristics of women in prison reflect, largely, the profile of women who live in poverty – women who are unemployed, who have experienced homelessness, who live with poor physical and mental health (Fitch *et al.*, 2011). Shame and stigma attach themselves to women who are seen to be

unemployed, unemployable, 'living off the state', women who are criminalised – either due to a formal sentence or because of perception. Valentine's work on *Inequality and Class Prejudice in an Age of Austerity* (2014) details a marked decrease in societal compassion and empathy for those who are perceived as the 'undeserving poor', as 'morally deficient', an attitude further entrenched in relation to women with experience of the criminal justice system. For them, a criminal record and the limited access to employment that this ensures means that many women continue to be further punished – economically and socially – beyond the term of their sentence.

Clean Break

In attending to the needs of women who have experience of the criminal justice system through its distinctive organisational practices, Clean Break addresses wider issues of gendered social inequality and gendered social injustice. It models an ambitious and enduring resistance to the critical lack of care – even 'care-lessness' – in state policy and cultural representations of criminalised women. Clean Break values 'compassion, collaboration, respect and relationship-making' (Perman, 2018) and this informs all aspects of its work, from direct intervention with women with lived experience of the criminal justice system through its education programme and consciousness raising through the commissioning, producing and touring of productions that place stories of these lives centre stage. These values are the antithesis of coercion and control, they are a distinctive practical politics of care, addressing social injustice and a care deficit and have been evident from the genesis and subsequent development of the company over the past forty years.

Clean Break theatre company was established by Jacqueline Holborough and Jenny Hicks while at HMP Askham Grange, an open prison in the North East of England. In its early years, Clean Break was a collective of women with experience of prison, who devised, wrote and performed plays about their experience, the impact of this on their lives and the lives of their families. These productions toured to theatres, prisons, educational and community centres across the UK and, on occasion, to the USA and the Netherlands. By the mid-1980s, the company had established a unique voice in contemporary British theatre, continuing to raise challenging questions about identity politics, gendered experience of criminal justice and modes of theatre production. During the 1980s, the availability of government funding for the arts was increasingly conditional on organisations demonstrating hierarchical management structures that reflected more traditional business models, and the collective identity of Clean Break was necessarily expanded to include artists and arts professionals who shared a commitment to the mission of the company, rather than the shared lived experience of incarceration. After years of financial instability, with the company

working with box-office splits, small grants and considerable volunteer labour, Clean Break was finally supported by the Greater London Council and Arts Council England. This wider recognition of the unique work of the company was consolidated in 1995, when the company secured funding for the building of a women-only theatre, education and social space in Kentish Town, North London, where the company is still based. Between 1997 and 2018, Clean Break was led by Lucy Perman. At the time of writing, the company is making significant changes in its organisational structures and programmes, decentralising its power structures and increasing collaboration with members in the planning and realisation of the company's work.

Clean Break's women-only building has been an integral part of the company's less-visible but core work, offering extensive and free education, training and support for thousands of women referred by prison, probation and voluntary sector services. Over 70 per cent of graduates from Clean Break's education programme have gone on to further education, employment or training (Abraham and Busby, 2015). The impact of Clean Break's work has been far-reaching – not only for the individual women who have worked with the company but in shifting public understandings about gendered inequality across a network of organisations in arts, education, criminal justice, the voluntary sector and government who have partnered with it.

In addition to this necessarily less-visible work, Clean Break has, over the last four decades, made a significant contribution to contemporary British theatre through the commissioning of new writing focusing on women and criminal justice, staged and produced by women-only casts and creative teams. The range of playwrights commissioned during this time is extraordinary, some established and others at earlier stages of their careers: Bryony Lavery, Sarah Daniels, Paulette Randall, Rebecca Prichard, Winsome Pinnock, Lucy Kirkwood, Theresa Ikoko, Alice Birch and Chino Odimba. The company's relentless commitment to expose the hidden narratives beyond the stereotypes of women and crime details an expansive and interconnected range of social injustices in over sixty plays including: mental illness (*Sounds Like an Insult*, 2014, Vivienne Franzmann), enduring poverty and social immobility (*Spent*, 2016, Katherine Chandler), racism (24%, 1991, Paulette Randall), drug abuse (*Pests*, 2014, Vivienne Franzmann), family rupture (*Billy the Girl*, 2013, Katy Hims; *House*, 2016, Somalia Seaton) and sex trafficking (*it felt empty when the heart went at first but it's alright now*, 2009, Lucy Kirkwood). This brief selection of plays illustrates some of the ways that Clean Break has invited the public to attend to the experience of women whose lives are often masked by stereotype and lazy cultural representation. The company's commitment to reach a broad range of audiences is evident as, in addition to touring work to mainstream major theatres including the Royal Court and the Royal Exchange, it also tours to smaller venues, festivals, prisons and specialist conferences on criminal justice and women's services. This is critical cultural work. But why, after

forty years, is this work still – urgently – needed? Clean Break's commitment to a practical politics of care presents a particular challenge to the company, continually negotiating a landscape where the pace of sociopolitical intervention is glacial. In the following section, I detail how public and political engagement with women and criminal justice continually fails to acknowledge the practical care needed to support the lives of women who have been disproportionately affected by social inequality. This sociopolitical inertia surrounding women and the criminal justice system has led to the neglect, dismissal and disruption of any significant interventions of support. For four decades, Clean Break has refused to be complicit in this apathy, not only critiquing it but responding to it – developing care-orientated practices that adapt to the needs of criminalised women, finding ways – and audiences – to address them despite economic, social and political torpor.

More 'troubled' than 'troublesome'

The light dancing on the Thames floods into the river-terrace function room at the House of Lords, the second chamber of the United Kingdom's Houses of Parliament. Three women in prison-regulation grey tracksuits, stand at one end of the room, commanding the attention of the audience of more than one hundred politicians, prison governors, National Offender Management Service staff, police and crime commissioners as well as staff from Women's Centres. One of the women speaks:

They're saying I've made myself intentionally homeless by coming into prison. Where am I going to live when I get out? How am I going to survive?

I talk to women here, in the kitchens, on the wing, and from what I can understand, and I'm not a politician, but their problems have started with lack of housing. So you've got vulnerable women, leaving prison unsafe, homeless, struggling to stay clean from drugs and alcohol, at risk of domestic abuse.

And, No support.

It's not rocket science, they'll end up back in.

When the woman declares herself 'not a politician', there is a ripple of laughter, an acknowledgement from the audience that this has been said in a room full of politicians, of people with influence on government or who are the frontline of implementing Ministry of Justice policy on law, policing and prisons. (Bruce, 2017)

The women in the above extract, actors from Clean Break, were performing *Hear*, a short play written by Deborah Bruce, informed by the voices and opinions of women serving sentences, who had recently participated in a writing residency with the company. *Hear* was commissioned by Women in Prison for this event at the House of Lords, celebrating the ten-year anniversary of the publication of the Corston Report (2007), a landmark review of the treatment of women in the criminal justice system. The report acknowledged that, while women make up 4–6

per cent of the overall prison population, the majority of women serve short sentences for non-violent crimes, that prison is not always the most appropriate form of punishment and that a prison sentence can do more societal harm than good. In short, the Corston Report exposed how the treatment of many vulnerable women in prison failed to live up to Her Majesty's Prison Service's 'duty [...] to look after [those committed by the courts] with humanity' (Coyle, 2003: 10). Corston decimated the perpetuated, lazy stereotypes of women in prison as 'bad girls', exposing the deep-rooted, intersectional social injustices that shape the lives of many women who commit non-violent crime: women who are 'more "troubled" than "troublesome"' (2007: 16). Racism, poverty, histories of neglect, abuse, poor mental health, homelessness and limited access to education and employment are some of the structural, recurring issues faced by many women in the criminal justice system. In addition to wider concerns about the use and effectiveness of incarceration as punishment, Corston detailed the devastating social and economic consequences of women's incarceration on individuals and families that endures for generations including children being removed from their mothers, the loss of homes, limits on employment possibilities and enduring poor health.

Despite previous government reports (Ramsbotham, 1997) and the enduring advocacy of organisations, including Women in Prison and the Penal Reform Trust, it took the deaths of six women in HMP Styal in 2006 for the Labour government to take action. In taking on this review, Corston was explicit in her exasperation at the status quo:

I have been dismayed at the high prevalence of institutional misunderstanding within the criminal justice system of the things that matter to women and at the shocking level of unmet need. Yet the compelling body of research which has accumulated over many years consistently points to remedies. Much of this research was commissioned by government. There can be few topics that have been so exhaustively researched to such little practical effect as the plight of women in the criminal justice system. (2007: 16)

A decade later, however, little has changed for women who are at risk of entering or returning to the criminal justice system. At this House of Lords' event, Women in Prison launched *The Corston Report 10 Years On: How Far Have We Come on the Road to Reform for Women Affected by the Criminal Justice System?* (2017). This report reviewed (in)action undertaken in response to each of the recommendations. Once again, despite cross-party acknowledgement of the value of the report's findings, successive governments' action continues to be patchy and sporadic: austerity measures and regulation threaten the very viability of interventions, including Corston's highly successful community-based Women's Centres, supporting a wide range of needs for women at risk of entering or returning to prison (Howard League, 2016).

Corston's call for societal compassion, her frustration at the lack of political commitment and the continued need for urgent penal reform is echoed, ten years later, by the voice of another character in *Hear*, who states, with incredulity, 'My God, the cost! The cost of putting the kids in care. The cost of our incarceration. What sense does it make to cut the services that support us? You'll end up paying ten times further down the line for the chaos it causes. No one's looking at the bigger picture are they?' (Bruce, 2017: 5). The potency of *Hear* is heightened by the audience's understandings that the play is informed by the voices of women currently living in prison and performed by actors, graduates of Clean Break's education programme, who have experience of prison. The question, 'No one's looking at the bigger picture are they?' was particularly powerful in the context of performances for audiences of politicians and policy makers at the House of Lords and staff at the Ministry of Justice, where *Hear* was performed as part of International Women's Day celebrations the following day. Both the Corston Report and *Hear* expose a 'care deficit' – a structural gap between the recognition that care is required (caring about) and knowing that the caring needs have been met (care receiving). This gap reflects Tronto's observation that caring about and taking care of are often 'the duties of the powerful while care-giving and care-receiving are left to the less powerful' ([1993] 2009: 114). This gap ensures an interruption in care: a failure of care to be received by those who most need it, despite the best efforts of individuals on the front line of care services pushed to the brink of collapse. This is the terrain of Clean Break's 2015 production, *Joanne* by Deborah Bruce, Theresa Ikoko, Laura Lomas, Chino Odimba and Ursula Rani Sarma. The dramaturgical structure of the play, shaped by five writers collaborating on separate monologues that connect to reveal the overarching narrative of Joanne's life and final hours, was the first time that Clean Break had worked in this way. The writers developed a timeline that created a narrative with potential characters – people from front-line services such as the National Health Service (NHS) – but there was no prescription as to who the character would be. Informed by research into the impacts of austerity on the lives of those who are particularly vulnerable (Ali, 2015) and interviews with people who support women when released on a day-to-day basis, *Joanne* is an example of the way in which Clean Break's practical politics of care has supported the development of new dramaturgical structures. *Joanne* is a state-of-the-nation play, capturing the long moment of critical impact when the state refuses to take responsibility to care about or care with those who are most vulnerable within it.

Joanne: a fatal interruption of care

Joanne stages the final twenty-four hours in the life of a young woman after she is released from prison. We never meet the eponymous Joanne but

aspects of her life are revealed through the testimony of five women, played by the same actor (Tanya Moodie in the original production). Each of these five characters has a role to play in organisations and institutions that Joanne comes into contact with, before and after prison: school, the police, the NHS, a charity that supports prisoners as they prepare for release and a hostel that provides accommodation for homeless prisoners. Throughout each of the five monologues, the audience is given insight into Joanne's life and the hours before her death: they reveal moments of a life untethered through grief, self-harm, drugs and, most damagingly, isolation – a life with no family or friends to turn to. The monologues also give insight into the personal and professional lives of Stella, Grace, Kathleen, Alice and Becky – women who work on the front line of care services; women who, in their personal lives, have significant caring responsibilities. Focusing on three of these monologues gives insight into the labour of care and the formal care systems that are under acute and unsustainable pressure, where individuals employed within them feel compelled but constrained to offer responsive care beyond what the system anticipates and plans for.

We meet Stella on her last day of work, giving a farewell speech to colleagues in a charity that supports prisoners preparing for release. She has been made redundant because the charity's funding has run out. As a woman with a criminal record, Stella's employment opportunities are curtailed, 'If it wasn't for this job. If it wasn't for them believing in me. Anyway you know what I mean. Not many options to put my "experience" to good use if you know what I mean' (Bruce *et al.*, 2015: 3). Stella is the person who meets with Joanne in the weeks before she leaves prison and is there for her the moment she walks out the gate, who intercepts her before the lingering drug dealers do, who navigates services with her, 'Probation. Doctor. Homeless Unit' (Bruce *et al.*, 2015: 8). We also learn that Stella cares for her mum who has complex needs, 'I'll feed her, wash her, and sit in the house with her watching TV all day cuz she's too scared to go out, too scared to wash her hair, too scared of everything' (Bruce *et al.*, 2015: 9). With an absence of any family support, Stella becomes Joanne's sole but temporary guide to the world beyond the prison gate: she helps Joanne access her medication and battles, in vain, to ensure that Joanne is not put in a wet hostel with drug addicts and alcoholics. Despite the demands of home and work and facing imminent unemployment, Stella's ethic of care continues to fuel her engagement with Joanne, 'This is the bit of the job I love. Loved. The human-contact bit, the breaking-the-ice bit. The breaking-into-a-smile bit. And there's that feeling. The reason why we do it. That thing that makes you wake up every morning to do it' (Bruce *et al.*, 2015: 6–7). Stella's concern for Joanne goes beyond the parameters of her job, it is interpersonal and, in Tronto's terms, interdependent – it is, as Stella says, 'that feeling ... The reason why we do it'. However, at the end of this particular day, Stella has no job, no official responsibility to Joanne but she worries, 'Who's going to check on her tomorrow? [...] Who cares now?' (Bruce *et al.*, 2015: 7).

When Joanne gets into a fight at the hostel because someone steals the Mickey Mouse watch her dead father had once given her, the police are called. Grace is a police officer with the London Met, and she arrives with her partner Harry, a ‘nice decent bloke ... believes in doing things by the book’ (Bruce *et al.*, 2015: 5). As her monologue unfolds, Grace reveals her pathway to the police, one that is very different to what could have been: teenage years wrecked by grief, numbed by alcohol and sex and forever scarred by not intervening when she was part of a gang that bullied a girl who then attempted suicide. As a teenage mum, Grace witnessed ‘nine-year-olds smoking weed in the stairwells and twelve-year-olds pushing prams of their own’ (Bruce *et al.*, 2015: 15). The thought of her daughter being caught up in this world made Grace take action, leave and train for the police. When Grace encounters Joanne, she should, according to the rules, report the incident. But Joanne is so distressed by the prospect of returning to prison that Grace steps beyond the parameters of the official rules of her role and acknowledges the person before her:

And suddenly I see her, the moments that have defined her, that have led her to this kitchen tonight, standing in front of me, shaking, saying going back to prison will break her [...] I tell Harry we’ll keep this one between the two of us ... and he doesn’t like it [...] We have to follow procedure ... No we don’t, we fucking don’t, all we have to do is what we think is right. And this is the right thing. I’m sure of it. (Bruce *et al.*, 2015: 17)

Grace’s distinction between procedure (playing by the rules) and doing the right thing (responding to the human before her) illuminates the care labour that characterises so much work on front-line services. It illustrates the sharp distinction between care that an organisation plans for with procedures that are managed, and care work that is responsive, attended to by an individual who becomes open to another through this encounter, resisting the professional administration of care that processes and categorises aspects of a person’s behaviour rather than considering the person in the entirety of their being. *Joanne* exposes the unresolvable tension between the two.

The social and personal impact of this lived-with tension is even more heightened in Kathleen’s monologue. Kathleen is an accident and emergency (A&E) receptionist in an NHS hospital. When Joanne appears before Kathleen she is distressed, suffering side effects from the wrong medication and suicidal, asking to be sectioned. As Kathleen tries to attend to Joanne she is accosted by a man, ‘Aggressive, proper nasty’, who ‘comes right up to the grid, presses his mouth right into it [...] “What do you care? [...] With ya cuts and ya community plans and ya broken promises.” I can feel the wetness on my chin as his spit sprays on the face of the NHS’ (Bruce *et al.*, 2015: 26). By the time Kathleen attends to the man with a professionalism that she has learnt to armour herself with, Joanne has disappeared. Kathleen’s concern for Joanne, for all the people in crises she has met over thirty years of

A&E night shifts means that she is tormented by her work, by the chronic and unmet need she witnesses daily:

They're all there, curled up on the bed next to me, squeezed into the drawers of my bedside cabinet, in my glasses case, wrapped around the legs of the bed.

With their broken toes and high temperatures and domestic incidents and split lips and cracked heads and stomachs needing pumping and hearing voices and handcuffed to police. The schizos and psychos, knives hidden in socks, the boys wanting their mums. Rumbling appendixes and no GP appointments and infected dog bites and third-degree burns, the pub fights and chest pains, the luckless and the poverty struck and the poor lonely live-alones with no one to tell them to take two aspirin and get an early night. (Bruce *et al.*, 2015: 26–7)

This litany of human hurt is the daily business of care workers, people like Stella, Grace and Kathleen who are the public face of state and voluntary service care. They are the women who stand on the front line, making direct contact with people whose lives are in crisis, a buffer between the messy needs of lives and the management systems that administer professional care at a distance to the bodies themselves. They are, as Róisín McBrinn, the joint artistic director at Clean Break identifies, the 'very brittle army, kept fighting through good will and human endurance' (McBrinn, 2015: n.p.). These are the women who witness the crises of care in which Joanne – and other nameless, faceless women who leave prison on a daily basis – is fatally enmeshed: they witness the complexity and fragility of a life that is barely visible to the public, that is made even more vulnerable in a context of cuts to services in the name of prudence in an age of austerity. In *Joanne*, Clean Break asks the audience to attend to what we – individuals and the state – don't, or won't, see.

Towards a practical politics of care

For Clean Break, theatre is both the medium to address social injustices experienced by criminalised women and the means to make a direct intervention in the individual lives of women they work with. Alongside its commitment to producing new plays that directly engage with issues of women and criminal justice, Clean Break offers training and education opportunities for women who have experience of or are at risk of entering the system. Clean Break's unique education programme, which ran for twenty years until 2017, offered women a range of courses specifically related to theatre making – performance, backstage craft, writing for performance – alongside courses that support personal development – anger management, literacy and mental health and well-being. Women travelled to the programme from across London's thirty-three boroughs and, at times, beyond. Some of the women had completed prison

sentences, others were released on temporary license (ROTL). Some were referred by women's and health services who recognised them as being 'at risk' of offending, others encountered members of Clean Break's student support team when they were visiting prisons, probation, bail hostels or community-based alcohol or drug projects. While the offer of Clean Break's education programme was appealing in principle, many women faced practical barriers that could easily prevent them from leaving home, let alone travelling across the city and engaging with any formal education or training programme. A major part of the work of the education programme took place beyond the studios, ensuring that women were supported in being able to take up the invitation to participate: women were offered financial support for travel, a hot lunch and, when needed, hand-holding assistance to get to the building (Perman, 2016). In the early 1990s, when Clean Break's new women-only centre was being planned, there was a conscious decision not to have a crèche in the building to ensure that the women had time and space to attend to their own needs; however, Clean Break provides support in both setting up and paying for childcare. Once the women make it to through Clean Break's door, there is substantial support that ranges from food-bank vouchers to counselling, from careers guidance to housing support. These structures of care have been rigorously thought through, attending to a range of interlinked challenges to be negotiated. For Lucy Perman, Chief Executive of Clean Break from 1997 to 2018, care is integral to the company's values:

It is in all our practices: how we talk to the women; how we interact with them; treating them for who they are and what they want to share with you; respecting them, their history, their story [...] It's creating the relationship and environment for a woman to be able to share everything and anything that is in her life that is a barrier to her participating in our offer and supporting her to move on with her life in the way she wants to. (2016)

One of the many remarkable things about Clean Break is how it fosters relationships between members and between members and staff. There is a strong sense of Clean Break as being a point of focus – as a place, an idea and a community – to which people have a strong attachment. This has been apparent in conversations with students, graduates, writers, actors, staff from partner organisations in prisons and theatres and members of staff who no longer work there. The company's commitment to theatre as a means to navigate, critique and understand the world is reiterated through the practical acquisition of skills; the emphasis on personal development; the valuing of collaboration that invites people to contribute in the way that they are able to at a particular moment; the collective witnessing of people making constructive changes in their lives; and the playfulness and rigor of the theatre that is shared with a wider Clean Break audience.

Care and inter/dependence

One of the challenges the organisation is keenly aware of is negotiating when the support offered to the women through the structures and relationships in the company tips the balance towards dependency. It is imperative that the organisation facilitates the women in their self-care and steps towards independence. In the context of Clean Break, care is something that is both structurally planned for *and* responsive, creating a model of relational practice, committed to negotiating the challenges of human interdependence in the attempt to imagine and realise a more just society. This model of organisational practice and culture takes time to evolve and maintain. Lucy Perman identified the ongoing challenge the organisation faced maintaining a culture of care when society is

under siege from government cuts to education, health and social care. In a time of austerity, the women's sector, a sector that is founded on caring for 'vulnerable women', is under massive pressures and is having to behave in a way that is the antithesis of that because of Transforming Rehabilitation and funding cuts. The environment of the building and the values which underpin our practice feel under threat, they could seem old fashioned. [...] There's something about time which is under pressure in this period – it takes time to allow relationships and trust to grow, for brilliant, creative and fruitful things to happen. (2016)

At the time of writing, two years since this interview took place, Clean Break is in a period of transition. The company began a restructuring process after a lengthy consultation process with its staff, board members, current students, graduates and stakeholders. A number of factors informed this: the external environment, particularly the combined impacts of Brexit preparations, the impact of austerity with cuts across criminal justice, women's services, education and the arts, along with, more positively, the company's ongoing reflection of how best to support women with experience of the criminal justice system through theatre. While previously, Clean Break had four identifiable strands of work – artistic, education, engagement and leadership – in the newly proposed model, the company has assimilated all its activity into one artistic programme. Within this, opportunities for personal development, education and training that were once delivered through a structured programme of separate courses have been integrated, bringing Clean Break Members (previously students and graduates) to the 'heart of our theatre-making and organization' (Clean Break, 2018: 3). Additionally, the hierarchical model of power with a single figure of ultimate authority, the role of the chief executive, has been recalibrated with three people/roles taking equal responsibility for the company. In an interview in 2018, in the week before leaving the company after leading it for twenty-one years, Lucy Perman, reflected on these changes:

With this new structure and the theatre produced, we are trying to do more consciousness raising with the women rather than on behalf of or for the

women. That's going to be a work in progress for some time. But there are moments where you can see it already happening – like Deborah Bruce [Clean Break's current writer in residence] saying, we have a writing circle, we don't have a writing course. In the writing circles that she runs, she writes with the women and that's quite different [...] and that is exactly the change that we are wanting to make – artists alongside Members collaborating and making work together. The more we get the women involved in making decisions and coming up with ideas, the more it'll feel different. We won't know what these ideas will look like, but they won't look like the ones we're dreaming up now and that's great. It's about more of an equal distribution of power – not an old style paternalistic way of doing things of behalf of the 'less fortunate', the 'traumatised' or the 'vulnerable'. (2018)

This restructuring is a further reiteration of Clean Break's practical politics of care. For the organisation to continue to do work that contributes to making 'a society where women can realise their full potential, free from criminalisation' (Clean Break, 2018: 6), it demands negotiation, collaboration and interdependence working *alongside* the women it seeks to represent through theatre. This resonates with Tronto's care ethic in practice, with an organisational structure and approach that purposefully disrupts the accretion of power to those who have it (in this case, social capital and a life without the stigma of criminalisation) and legitimates the sharing of power with 'outsiders' (Tronto, [1993] 2009: 20).

Conclusion

While researching with the company for over three years, I have witnessed Clean Break's ethic of care in its daily practices: from the creative writing residencies in prisons, to the graduation ceremonies of students in the education programme; from the post-show conversations that invite a general public's engagement in issues about the criminalisation of women, to the ways in which staff and members talk with each other in hallways, theatre foyers and workshops.

Clean Break's approach to women and criminal justice is, in effect, an approach to supporting women made vulnerable through societal structural disadvantage. Is it fueled by compassion and an ethic of care – it mirrors Tronto's acknowledgement of care as an approach to personal, social and political life that acknowledges that *all* human beings need, receive and give care to others – that we are interdependent ([1993] 2009). But to be interdependent, to witness and respond to others who are vulnerable, who live in volatile worlds, is a major political and social commitment. It demands a relational approach, a dialogue with those who are othered. An ethic of care is an approach that struggles to win any political votes with an electorate conditioned to be fearful of crime and those who are criminalised, where austerity, cuts to public services and increased costs of living encourage individualism and protectionism. Each element of Clean Break's work is

part of coherent and holistic commitment to negotiating the challenges of human interdependence in the attempt to imagine and realise a more just society. It has also, as identified in relation to the new organisational structure and practices, ensured the structure, approach and reach of the company continues to evolve.

It has been less than a decade since the idea of the Big Society was proposed in Britain as the cornerstone of the 2010 Conservative Party manifesto, an ideology that would, supposedly, redistribute power from central government to local communities to enhance civic responsibility, volunteerism and local action. Critics argued that the Big Society was an excuse for government not to take responsibility or invest in much needed structures or services to support those in need but rather it would hand this responsibility to voluntary and charitable organisations who were already committed to doing this work, organisations like Clean Break. The company has attended to the needs of thousands of individual women who have participated in the education programme and training opportunities, supporting their transition into education, employment and desistance with a model of care that reflects the organisation's investment in support structures for them. However, it is important to recognise that Clean Break is, first and foremost, a theatre company. It has made a critical intervention in the lives of women who have been failed by the state but it cannot and must not take the place of it. Lucy Perman (2018) reflected on this tension:

Recently care hasn't been a particularly positive term. It's linked with social work and people in care. The connotations and profile around that sector is that it is stretched and starved and that has resulted in failings in care provision. We identify ourselves with the theatre sector, we wouldn't see ourselves as part of the care sector but we do have a duty of care, we do provide care, we are caring and it's very much ingrained in the organisation's values. But it becomes problematic when you define the organisation in that way because you then become part of the system; it defines how people who are part of the care sector might relate to you, it doesn't feel a particularly equal relationship. The company has intervened when the state fails but with the recent changes in the company we have made a clear and determined shift towards consciousness raising and more theatre output – and away from so much 'direct provision'.

In May 2015, Clean Break hosted a Long Table event inviting students, graduates, staff, associate artists and teachers as well as board members to reflect on the organisation and their relationship with it. One of the graduates spoke about Clean Break as 'they'. Later in the conversation, another woman came to the table and rejected this term, proposing that 'us' is more appropriate. I conclude this chapter with a quotation from this woman as she articulates how Clean Break realises Tronto's vision of 'care with', of interdependence, 'consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom for all' (2013: 23):

I was drawn to come to the table every time I heard the word they because Clean Break is us [...] Home is where the heart is and the heart of Clean Break hasn't changed although so many other things have. Clean Break gave me access to theatre. It gave access to women like me and that's what Clean Break continues to do [...] As an organisation Clean Break didn't just embrace me but many, many other women – whether it's a woman who has come here to go on a course, to audition to take part in one of the professional productions, whether you are on the Board or a member of staff here – we all come here because we have a real belief in the work. I think it's really evident when we look around the room today that that job has been done, and done wonderfully, by us. *Us*, not they. (Clean Break Associate A, 2015)