

The Ponty-esque Body: An Introspection into the Meaning of Violence and Terror in Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*

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In Far Away (2000), Caryl Churchill presents a society marked by violence and moral collapse. The play follows Joan, a young girl whose experiences with violence are central to her understanding of her world. While many critics view Far Away as a commentary on political issues, in this paper I focus on its exploration of embodied perception, where the body and its movements are key to understanding the play's theme of violence. I argue that Churchill's portrayal of violence and terror is deeply rooted in the sensory and spatial experience of Joan's body; Joan's body, as a site of both perception and action, becomes pivotal in navigating and responding to the pervasive violence around her. Just as Joan's shifting proximity to violence alters her perception, the audience's experience mirrors this shift. Churchill manipulates spatial distance to present violence not as immediate and visceral, but as an abstract, mediated concept. This dislocation comments on how proximity and detachment distort the reality of violence, while implied violence forces viewers to confront the unseen brutality. In exploring the intricate relationship between the body, perception, and space, Maurice Merleau-Ponty emerges as a leading philosopher due to his profound insight into these concepts, which I will use as the framework for this paper.

Keywords

The Three Ponty-esque Problems; the lived body; movement; violence; terror

Introduction

In *Far Away*, Caryl Churchill presents a society marked by violence and moral collapse. The play follows Joan, from childhood to adulthood, through a fragmented narrative. The story unfolds through Joan's vivid recounting of

the violent episodes she encounters or witnesses. As a result, these experiences of violence become integral to her perception of the world, shaping her understanding of reality itself. What I aim to explore in this paper is how Joan's body, as a site of perception¹, becomes central to her engagement with and a response to the pervasive violence that surrounds her. In the play, spatial distance and bodily orientation are key to conveying how terror and violence are perceived. Joan's movement towards or away from violent scenes not only reveals them but also shifts her understanding of violence with her proximity, whether near or distant, serving as a lens through which the nature of violence itself is perceived and redefined. In my reading, violence in *Far Away* is not merely an external force but an embodied experience, one that is inextricably linked to the spaces Joan inhabits and the movements she makes within them. Just as Joan's movement towards or away from violent scenes alters her perception of violence, the audience's experience mirrors this shift. Through strategic dislocation and manipulation of spatial distance, Churchill places the audience in a position where violence is not encountered as something immediate and visceral, but as an abstract, mediated concept. This creates a subtle yet powerful commentary on how proximity and detachment can distort the reality of violence, both for the characters and the audience. Additionally, the hidden nature of some of the violence, often implied rather than explicitly staged, deepens this distortion, compelling viewers to grapple with the unseen and the unspoken in the play's unsettling portrayal of brutality.

While many critics view *Far Away* as a commentary on political issues, I focus on its exploration of embodied perception, where the body² and its movements are key to understanding the play's theme of violence. In exploring the intricate relationship between the body, perception, and space, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) emerges as a leading philosopher due to his profound insight into these concepts. At the intersection of body and perception within the play, two compelling questions arise: How does the physical body play a role in perceiving the world in Merleau-Ponty's terms, within the Churchillian world? And how does this interplay between embodied perception and the contextual significance of space in the Churchillian world influence the meaning of violence? To answer these two questions, I follow a structured analytical approach grounded in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. I will read *Far Away* through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, examining how Joan's embodied experiences shape her understanding of violence, perception, and space. In doing so, I will address what I call The Three Ponty-esque Problems³: body, perception, and space, exploring how key

moments of Joan's physical actions and interactions with her environment drive her transformation. I argue that Churchill's portrayal of violence and terror is deeply rooted in the sensory and spatial experience of the body, challenging conventional narratives. This approach reveals how perception is not just passive observation but an active, embodied process, where the body is central to the construction of knowledge, responsibility, and moral engagement with the world. Through this reading, I uncover the play's critique of familiar concepts of safety, complicity, and violence, demonstrating how the interplay between physicality and environment destabilises traditional understandings of reality.

Churchill's treatment of the body in *Far Away* resonates deeply with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, offering a dynamic lens through which to analyse the connection between body, perception, and space. By analysing her work through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, one can gain a deeper understanding of how these elements converge to unfold the pervasive violence that permeates the narrative in *Far Away*. Therefore, the decision to juxtapose Churchill's work with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology arises from their shared focus on the body as an epistemological tool. Though Churchill may not consciously frame her works through this lens, her treatment of the body reflects its central role in shaping human experience. Churchill's theatre, which "presents itself as an auto-sufficient physicality" (Lehmann 95) aligns with Merleau-Ponty's view that perception is "fundamentally embodied" and that "man is a mind with a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things" (*The World of Perception* 43). Moreover, Merleau-Ponty critiques the conventional understanding of reality as fixed and objective, advocating for a more fluid, embodied perception. Similarly, Churchill's innovative techniques, such as cross-gender casting in *Cloud 9* published in 1979, destabilise traditional notions of identity and truth, echoing Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception as a "fluid, subjective" process. By rejecting static, detached views of reality, both Merleau-Ponty and Churchill emphasise the active, physical engagement of the body in the continuous shaping of experience.

On Movement and Space: "I went out the window... I wanted to see"⁴

In *Far Away*, Churchill intricately ties Joan's movement through space to

her evolving perception of violence. The moment Joan says, “I went out the window... I wanted to see” (Churchill 2,3), marks her first active engagement with the hidden violence in her world. By analysing this pivotal scene through The Three Ponty-esque Problems; body, perception, and space, I argue that Joan’s physical movement is central to how she perceives and understands the violent forces around her. As she moves from the safety of her room to the unsettling outside world, her embodied journey uncovers the underlying violence, shifting her perception and complicity in the process.

In *Far Away*, Churchill intricately intertwines physical movement with perception, positioning Joan’s body as a crucial agent in her understanding of the world. When Joan decides to leave the relative safety of her room and moves towards the source of a noise, she takes a deliberate step into the unknown. This moment, “I went out the window” (3), marks more than a simple act of curiosity. It is the beginning of her direct confrontation with a violent reality that has previously been hidden from her. In choosing to move, Joan shifts from passive observation to active engagement, where her body becomes the means through which she acquires knowledge.

This decision to step physically towards the noise encapsulates a vital transformation in Joan’s perception. It signals the moment when her body, through movement, becomes an active participant in shaping her understanding of the world around her. The significance of this is not merely in the act of moving; it lies in the way this movement changes how Joan sees and experiences what is beyond her immediate surroundings. Her body is seen in this way as no longer just a vessel for action; it is a means through which she engages with, discovers, and begins to comprehend the violent forces at play in her environment.

To understand the depth of this embodied experience, it helps to turn to Merleau-Ponty, whose concept of the “lived body” (*le corps vécu*)⁵ illuminates how perception is not a passive mental act but an active, embodied process. This can be referred to as the Ponty-esque body which, according to Merleau-Ponty “is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception” (*Phenomenology of Perception* 354). Based on this, our bodies are not just vessels for movement but the very means through which we experience and interpret the world. For Joan, stepping outside her room is not a simple physical action; it is a profound shift in how she perceives and understands the environment around her. The Ponty-esque

body, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, is not separate from perception; it is the site of perception itself, where the physical act of moving reshapes and redefines how one understands the world.

Joan, in her conversation with her aunt Harper in Scene 1, reveals her desire to engage physically with her environment. Her movement becomes an embodied act of knowledge, a quest to understand, not by simply observing from a distance, but through active involvement. By moving, Joan does not just encounter the outside world; she becomes part of it, intertwining her body with her understanding of what lies beyond the window. This moment in the conversation, where she positions her body as a crucial participant in her understanding of the world, demonstrates that knowledge, for Joan, is not something that can be gained at a distance or through passive observation. She desires to experience the world not from a safe remove but through direct, physical engagement where her body, in motion, becomes the site of discovery. This is not just a desire to *see*, it is a desire to *know*, and it is through movement that she moves closer to this knowing. Her body is not merely carrying her through space; it is engaged in the process of understanding, making her interaction with the world more immediate and direct.

Joan's choice to approach the noise exemplifies Merleau-Ponty's concept of moving from "seeing" to "knowing" (44), which is a transition from passive observation to active, embodied understanding. For Merleau-Ponty, knowledge is a product of lived experience, and the body plays a fundamental role in shaping that knowledge. Joan's movement towards the shed reflects this shift. The action is not just a simple physical gesture; it represents her effort to bridge the gap between perception and understanding. The body, in this context, is an agent of perception; it moves, engages, and shapes the way the world is understood.

As Joan moves closer to the source of the noise and says, "I heard a noise" (Churchill 2), the dynamic relationship between the body and perception becomes increasingly evident. Her body is actively engaged in the process of knowledge acquisition: "there was a reason, I heard a noise, I wanted to see... I got down from the tree, I went to the lorry after I looked in the window of the shed" (2-3). This progression through space suggests that movement itself is a form of knowing, a way of exploring and interacting with the world, as Merleau-Ponty notes, "the body is our general medium for having a world" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 169). Joan's body, in this sense, becomes a subjective entity, one that is not only perceiving the world but also shaping her understanding of it. As Merleau-Ponty notes, "the theory of the

body is already a theory of perception” (235), meaning that to understand the world, we must first engage with it through our bodies. In Joan’s case, her physical movement is inseparable from her perceptual engagement with the world. The act of moving closer is, therefore, a means of knowing that is both intellectual and experiential.

In contrast to more traditional epistemological frameworks that treat knowledge as abstract and detached from the body, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology asserts that the body is the very ground of knowledge. Joan’s movements, in this light, can be read as an assertion of her agency in a world that often demands that knowledge be approached intellectually, from a distance. Instead, Joan chooses to understand the world through direct interaction, physically stepping into the unknown to grasp the truth of her situation. In this respect, her movement serves as an act of autonomy, a claim to a deeper understanding of both herself and her environment. Joan’s physical movement, then, is not simply a practical gesture; it is a performative act of knowing that challenges traditional modes of knowledge acquisition. Her decision to leave the safety of her room and approach the noise embodies the active nature of perception and knowledge in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Knowledge, for Joan, is something she actively creates through the embodied act of moving towards the world.

This leads naturally to an exploration of how space itself shapes Joan’s understanding. The space that Joan navigates, moving from the intimate confines of her room to the threatening outside world, further complicates her perception of safety and danger, revealing how perception is deeply intertwined with the physical spaces she inhabits. Churchill’s *Far Away* often invites various readings and analyses that explore the uncovering of the darker, hidden layers of her world. However, many of these interpretations overlook the role of Joan’s movement through space as the driving force behind revealing this reality. The transition from the world’s apparent safety to its increasingly surreal and dark nature is not just a thematic shift but one that unfolds through Joan’s physical navigation of the environment. Her movements, shifting from the relative safety of her bed to the increasingly disturbing spaces outside, become the mechanism through which this underworld is gradually exposed. It is through Joan’s active engagement with space that the veneer of comfort is stripped away, making visible the violence and chaos lurking just beneath the surface.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that perception is not only defined by movement but also by the ways in which we engage with and navigate the spaces around

us, “perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out” (*Phenomenology of Perception* xi). In *Far Away*, Churchill subtly intertwines Joan’s physical movement through varying spaces with a gradual shift in her perception. As Joan transitions from the seemingly safe space of her bed to the increasingly unsettling environments outside, her navigation of these spaces becomes integral to the revelation of a darker, more dangerous reality. Her movement through space, rather than merely reflecting a change in location, actively uncovers the tensions between security and threat, gradually dissolving the illusion of safety that once defined her world.

For Merleau-Ponty, perception is shaped by how the individual navigates and interacts with space: “by conceiving my body itself as a mobile object that I am able to interpret perceptual appearance and construct the ‘thing’ as it truly is” (236). Here, he suggests that the human body is a dynamic object in motion, implying that individuals use their bodies to engage with and make sense of what they perceive through their senses. Merleau-Ponty’s example of the cube serves as a particularly effective illustration of his ideas, demonstrating the relationship between body movement and space:

When we perceive a cube, we don’t just see its surfaces; we interact with it through movement, touch, and spatial awareness. The cube can be understood in different ways depending on the viewer’s position, angle, and movement. For instance, as we move around the cube, we see different faces and perspectives, illustrating that our understanding of objects is inherently tied to our physical being. Our body is not just an object in the world; it is the means through which we engage with and interpret our environment. Movement is a fundamental aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. He argues that our perception is dynamic and that we understand objects not as static entities but as part of a spatial and temporal context. As we move about a cube, the way it unfolds and presents itself changes, emphasizing the fluidity of perception. (236-239)

This idea of the body interacting with and navigating space is central to understanding Joan’s experience in *Far Away*. Space is not just a physical container; it actively shapes Joan’s perceptions and actions. The gradual breach of Joan’s space, from the safety of her bed to the lorry, reveals the underlying tension in her constructed world. The seemingly safe environment, where she initially feels protected: “It’s quite safe, there’s a roof and a tree” (Churchill 2),

begins to dissolve as Joan's movement from the bed to the lorry forces her to confront a much darker reality.

Joan stays in her aunt and uncle's home in the country, a setting typically associated with comfort, family love, and security. This space is supposed to be a place where one feels safe and protected. From the very beginning of the play, Harper is attentive to Joan's needs: "Are you cold? ... Do you want a hot drink? ... Come here a minute. You're shivering. Are you hot?" (1-2). However, Joan's gradual departure from her bed and her movement towards the lorry subvert this sense of safety. Her actions reveal a dark truth lurking beneath the surface, one that disrupts her understanding of the world she inhabits.

Joan explains to Harper why she climbs out of her window: after hearing a scream, she climbs onto the roof and down a nearby tree. From there, she witnesses her uncle forcing someone into a shed, while hearing cries coming from a large lorry. Moving closer to the shed, she peeks through the window and sees bloodstains on the ground and children inside, some of whom have blood on their faces (3-4). As Joan recounts what she saw, a disturbing reality emerges, one that exposes the violence and suffering hidden beneath the calm facade of her surroundings. The shift from the private, intimate space of her bed, a space that signifies personal safety, to the public, potentially dangerous space of the lorry suggests a forced awakening to the outside violence.

Churchill explores the nature of "perception as movement" by examining the relationship between the body, space, and perception. This intersection of physicality, perception, and space reveals the complexity of how we understand and engage with the world. Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "perception is an active engagement with the world, deeply rooted in our bodily existence, rather than a passive reception of stimuli" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 287) becomes evident here. The body is the primary way of knowing the world, and space is understood relationally, shaped by bodily movements and interactions with the environment. Joan's perception of space changes as she moves through it, and her bodily engagement with these spaces enables her to access new, unsettling truths about her environment.

In *Far Away*, Joan's movement through space becomes a dynamic force, not merely shifting her location but revealing the underlying tensions between safety and danger. Her embodied interaction with different environments gradually dismantles the illusion of security, exposing the darker, hidden layers of the world she inhabits. While much of the existing scholarship on the play focuses on the thematic shift from safety to danger, my focus on Joan's physical interaction with space reveals how this process is driven by her

movement. This embodied engagement with space does more than reflect a change of location; it actively contributes to the unveiling of the violence that lurks beneath the seemingly innocent surface of her surroundings. Through Merleau-Ponty's lens of perception, space is not merely a passive backdrop, but a dynamic force that shapes Joan's understanding of the world. Her movement through space, from the protective safety of her bed to the unsettling openness of the outside world, plays a pivotal role in shifting her perception. As Joan navigates these environments, her physical engagement with space destabilises the illusion of safety and reveals the darker, more violent truths lurking just beneath the surface. This embodied movement is not just a journey across physical boundaries, but a process through which Joan's perception of threat and danger transforms.

This exploration of movement and space sets the stage for a deeper investigation into the violence Joan witnesses. As her spatial relationship to her environment shifts, so too does her complicity in the violent acts she observes. The next section will explore how this evolving interaction with space and violence raises crucial questions about agency, moral responsibility, and the complexities of human response to terror. By tracing Joan's spatial journey, the paper will reveal how Joan's perception evolves, leading towards a broader discussion of complicity, agency, and ethical engagement in the face of violence.

Addressing Violence at Home: "Why was there so much blood?"⁶

The previous analysis has explored how Joan's movement through space actively shapes her understanding of her environment, progressively revealing a darker, more violent reality. This interplay between space, perception, and movement serves as the foundation for understanding Joan's evolving relationship to violence in the next phase of the play. By examining Joan's spatial navigation and its influence on her perception, we can better understand her transformation from an observer to an active participant in the violence around her. As she shifts physically from a safe, intimate environment to more exposed and dangerous spaces, the perceived safety of these settings becomes increasingly unreliable.

This directly influences her emotional and moral response to the violence she encounters, leading her from a detached position to one of deeper complicity.

Joan's physical movements and engagement with her environment have thus paved the way for her transformation from a passive bystander to a participant in a system of violence. This transition, which begins with the physical distance she maintains from the violence, eventually blurs the line between observer and participant, raising complex ethical questions about complicity and agency in her response to violence. The shift from space as a passive backdrop to a dynamic, active participant in Joan's perception also illuminates the violent realities at play, offering a critique of how familiarity and closeness can both cloud and distort one's understanding of danger. This exploration examines how changes in Joan's perception of space correspond to her growing sense of moral responsibility and complicity in the unfolding violence.

As the play progresses, Joan's movement becomes increasingly significant. The transition from witnessing violence to encountering it up close is pivotal; it signifies her engagement with the surroundings and a shift in her perspective, changing from an observer to a participant. Joan's question to Harper: "Why was there so much blood? I slipped in it" (Churchill 4), marks a turning point in the play, complicating the narrative and intensifying its ethical implications. This moment forces a reckoning with the complexities of voyeurism and the human capacity for violence. Far from being a mere witness, Joan's actions suggest that she and Harper are, in fact, complicit in the violence they encounter. The blood on Joan's foot, a tangible symbol of her direct engagement with the violence, underscores her transformation from passive observer to active participant. Initially, Joan appears detached from the horrors unfolding around her, but as she physically engages with the scene, that detachment dissolves, giving way to a deeper, more unsettling complicity.

This shift raises critical commentary on the nature of agency and moral responsibility. By stepping into the scene, Joan blurs the line between passive observer and active participant, thus implicating herself in the violence she has witnessed. The blood that stains her foot is not merely a byproduct of proximity but a marker of her involvement, suggesting that her engagement with violence, both physical and moral, is no longer passive observation but a choice. This moment of physical contact with violence invites a broader reflection on collective responsibility: not just the act of witnessing but the ethical consequences of remaining complicit in such acts. Joan's transformation speaks to a broader commentary on the role of agency, complicity, and the moral dimensions of involvement in violence. By shifting from a position of passive observation to active engagement, she embodies the ethical tension

between recognition of violence and responsibility for it. This is a crucial shift in the play, one that complicates the very notion of being a mere observer in a world shaped by violence.

As Joan navigates her surroundings, her proximity to violence becomes increasingly blurred by the spaces she inhabits. In this context, Churchill presents the complexities of human perception of violence in the context of familiarity. She reveals how intimate knowledge of one's environment can shape responses and cloud the truth, making it difficult to recognise a genuine threat or a dangerous situation. This intimate connection can lead to underestimating dangers or misinterpreting aggressive behaviours, as the perception is coloured by sense of safety within familiar surroundings.

In *Far Away*, what initially appears to be a safe environment is gradually revealed to be a setting for unsettling events and disturbing truths, as the contrast between the home's perceived security and the violence that emerges exposes the deceptive nature of familiarity and the fluidity of perception itself. Joan's sense of safety and comfort within her familiar environment leads her to downplay or even overlook the presence of danger. This phenomenon echoes Merleau-Ponty's observation that, when immersed in familiarity, individuals often fail to see what has become "entirely natural" to them: "thus far we have tried to look at space and the things which inhabit it, both animate and inanimate, through the eyes of perception and to forget what we find 'entirely natural' about them simply because they have been familiar to us for too long; we have endeavored to consider them as they are experienced naively" (*The World of Perception* 81). Based on this, Joan's immersion in the comforting routine of her surroundings causes her to dismiss the unsettling truth lurking beneath the surface. This perception is further compounded by Harper's gradual normalisation of violence, framing her husband's murder as a justified act against traitors: "You're part of a big movement now to make things better. You can be proud of that. You can look at the stars and think here we are in our little bit of space, and I'm on the side of the people who are putting things right, and your soul will expand right into the sky" (Churchill 5). In this context, Joan's perception of her uncle's violent actions becomes clouded by a lack of moral conflict, leading her to offer no resistance when it comes to assisting in the cleanup of blood the following day. Her embodied experience in this familiar space, combined with the influence of those around her, allows her to accept the violence unconsciously and even participate in it, highlighting the interplay between familiarity, perception, and complicity.

Churchill's decision to set the play in a domestic space during the first act, followed by a shift to a workplace setting in the second, serves to heighten the impact of the violence that slowly emerges. Both environments, traditionally associated with feelings of love, security, and familiarity, provide a stark contrast to the increasingly disturbing events that unfold within them. This juxtaposition amplifies the tension between the comfort of these spaces and the violent realities that begin to encroach upon them. By grounding the violence in settings that should evoke safety, Churchill underscores the deceptive nature of familiarity and the unsettling transformation of once-secure spaces into stages for horror.

Later, in Act 2, Joan becomes an adult, working next to a young man named Todd. They both work at a company that makes hats for prisoners facing execution in a weekly parade. Both Joan and Todd appear satisfied with their jobs; neither seems troubled by the rising number of prisoners nor do they question the justice of the trials (6-8). This forces readers to confront the uncomfortable idea that safety and danger can coexist in seemingly ordinary settings. This interplay underscores that human perception of safety is often grounded in one's relationship to space and familiarity, which can blur the reality of what is truly unfolding. In this way, safety becomes an illusion; something distorted by one's attachment to familiar surroundings. As Joan's spatial position shifts and her physical distance from violence changes, her perception of both the threat and her role in it transforms. What once appeared distant and unreal becomes immediate and personal, reshaping her understanding of violence and complicating her response to it.

Moreover, Joan's perception of violence is intricately influenced by the physical distance separating her body from the violent act in question. The position from which Joan observes the violent scene, specifically the lorry incident in the first act of the play (3-4), plays a crucial role in shaping her response to the violence. In this scene, Joan is not directly involved in the violent act but remains at a distance, both physically and perceptually, as she watches the unfolding events. Her position outside of the immediate threat allows her to remain somewhat detached and uninvolved, suggesting that proximity or distance from violence plays a significant role in how one perceives and reacts to it. This spatial separation reinforces the idea that physical distance creates a buffer, distancing the observer from the emotional or psychological weight of the violence. Joan's relative detachment stems from her position on the periphery of the event, where her bodily engagement is limited to observing rather than participating. In this way, distance acts as

both a literal and psychological shield, enabling Joan to process the violence at a remove, without experiencing the immediate fear or panic that one would face if physically closer to the act. This highlights the complexity of how spatial dynamics shape emotional and cognitive responses to violent events, where physical separation can dull the immediacy of the threat and allow for a more detached, even passive, response.

In Act 2, when violence is mediated through television, similarly, the characters, including Joan, remain physically removed from the event, creating a perceptual distance that dampens their immediate emotional reactions. The televised broadcast (7) serves to reinforce this detachment, allowing the characters to maintain an illusion of safety despite the unfolding chaos. Joan's perception is shaped by this gap, both physical and emotional, between her as a passive witness and the violence taking place elsewhere. The separation afforded by the screen diminishes her sense of involvement, transforming the violence into something distant and abstract, rather than immediate and threatening.

Likewise, Joan's emotional distance is further deepened by her belief that she is excluded from the violence itself. Particularly because the violence is perpetrated by her uncle, a familiar and trusted figure, she feels no sense of personal threat. Her understanding of him as a powerful, protective authority figure clouds her perception, leading her to assume she is safe from harm. This belief in her uncle's superiority and her own exclusion from the violence reinforces Joan's detachment from the brutality occurring around her. It contributes to a passive complicity, as she remains emotionally distant from the violence, even as she witnesses its effects. Her proximity to the violence, in this case, becomes an emotionally neutral space, allowing her to avoid confronting the deeper moral implications of what is happening.

The Body, "an Image of great beauty and great violence"⁷

In *Far Away*, Churchill, through the character of Joan, illustrates how the distance between the body and violence can distort perception, mirroring a broader technique that extends to the relationship between the play and its audience. Joan's physical and emotional separation from the violence she witnesses, such as when she observes brutal acts from a distance, reflects how terror, in her world, is not born from proximity, but from a disorienting,

mediated distance. This sense of distance also functions on a larger scale, as Churchill constructs a world where the audience, too, is distanced from the horror unfolding on stage. By manipulating the spatial orientation of bodies and the perception of violence, Churchill transforms terror from a palpable, immediate experience into something abstract and normalised. This approach challenges conventional forms of audience identification, urging a more critical engagement with violence that is aesthetically concealed. Through Joan's body, perception, and movement, Churchill's postdramatic strategies complicate not just our understanding of violence, but how it is processed; both by the characters within the play and by the audience watching it.

In her analysis of *Far Away*, Mary Luckhurst, referencing Judith Diamond's statement, emphasises that the distance between the audience and the depiction of violence contributes to the absence of visual horror. This distance highlights a disconnect between the perception of violence and the actual experience of it. By omitting visceral imagery, Churchill intensifies the tension, compelling the audience to confront the implications of violence rather than witnessing it firsthand. This shift focuses on the emotional and psychological ramifications of violence, emphasising the underlying horror found in silence and in what remains unspoken. As Diamond insightfully concludes while examining the parade scene: "This is the only time we see the dark world of the condemned (who are both male and female) and we never hear their stories but we 'know' their fate without having to see it. Churchill's 'permissible visibility' reflects the enforced silence and invisibility of the victims of torture, dictatorship, and genocide which crowd our newspapers and screens and yet remain marginal" (22-23). Therefore, the lack of overt violence in this scene generates a sense of dread or anticipation. While the characters may not be experiencing physical violence at that moment, the broader context of a violent world looms over them, creating a persistent unease. Moreover, R. Darren Gobert discusses a similar view suggested by Chaudhuri, noting that "the hats are made to 'silently scream out the horror that results when aesthetics loses all concern for the material reality from which it works', as Una Chaudhuri has seen" (33).

However, in my opinion, Churchill's deliberate avoidance of staging violence suggests the complexity of defining this phenomenon. What violence means is fluid, not fixed. Brubaker and Laitin emphasise this complexity in defining violence: "the problem of defining violence is not that there is no agreement on how things are to be explained; it is that there is no agreement on what is to be explained, or whether there is a single set of phenomena to be explained" (qtd. in Stanko 3). Churchill's avoidance of staging violence further

highlights the complexity in defining and understanding it. By not depicting violence directly, she invites a broader and more nuanced interpretation of what violence actually entails. Brubaker and Laitin's idea that violence is not easily defined or understood resonates here, because it acknowledges that violence cannot be reduced to a simple act or event. In *Far Away*, violence is more than what happens physically; it is about the way it permeates the fabric of daily life, the ways people interact with and normalise it, and how it becomes part of the background noise of existence. Churchill's choice reflects how violence, much like the world it inhabits, is fluid and constantly shifting, changing its forms, its impact, and how it is perceived. This fluidity of violence makes it even harder to pin down, turning it into something more subtle and insidious that can slip into the everyday without being fully acknowledged.

This fluid and complex nature of violence in *Far Away* is further explored through Churchill's representation of violence not as a direct act but as something that is deeply intertwined with aesthetics, dehumanisation, and spectacle. The parade scene (Churchill 8), in particular, becomes a striking example of how violence can be both grotesque and aesthetically elevated, forcing audiences to confront the dissonance between beauty and brutality. In this moment, the human body is transformed into both a victim and an object, and the sinister tone is set with Churchill's stage direction: "A procession of ragged, beaten, chained prisoners, each wearing a hat on their way to execution. The finished hats are even more enormous and preposterous than in the previous scene" (8). The scene depicts a surreal and chilling procession of individuals who carry out executions and represent a regime that dehumanises its victims. The grotesque nature of the bodies on display during Churchill's parade challenges traditional perceptions of the human form. Bodies are presented as mere vessels, stripped of autonomy. In this context, the human body transforms into a pedestal, walking in silence while wearing "enormous and preposterous" hats, akin to a fashion show.

The scene presents a striking visual language that reinforces the theme of bodily camouflage. The tableau of characters, adorned with their hats and surrounded by their environment, creates an image where the boundaries between human and environment blur. The body appears articulated to a non-body, to an absence. In other words, by giving the body the appearance of something else, its physical borders with the background seem to recede. The body as a "figure" transcends its physical form, melting into the background. This disappearance of the body shifts the attention away from its exterior form, supporting the illusions and narratives imposed upon it. This unsettling

perspective accentuates the body's vulnerability, offering a broader commentary on how societal pressures shape and distort identity and perception. Churchill delves into the grotesque, using human forms as mere pedestals for the broader societal and political commentary she weaves throughout her narrative. The play presents a parade of characters whose bodies melt into their surroundings, creating an unsettling yet thought-provoking experience that interrogates the nature of existence amid chaos. The bodies of those being executed are central to the parade, starkly contrasting the celebratory tone typically associated with parades. Rather than joyful floats and vibrant costumes, the executioners handle bodies as mere objects, highlighting the desensitisation to violence and death in their society.

Churchill shakes the audience's perception by staging death as entertainment. The parade of executioners is brutal and violent, yet the hats are intended for a fashion show or carnival. *Far Away* plays with perspective and illusion to highlight the "far away" social and political landscape that people often fail to see or overlook (Aston 116). In this regard, Churchill shifts the focus to the hats, drawing attention away from the human bodies themselves. Reinelt argues that "Churchill can be seen as one of Brecht's successors" (106), having borrowed many Brechtian techniques from epic theatre, especially the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect). Through this dislocation, Churchill creates a distance between the reader and the text, the audience and the performance, to bring into focus the idea that harsh realities are obscured and beautified: "The hats are 'beautiful'. And 'sad'. As dislocations are. And marvelous, as dislocations are... The hats of *Far Away* manage to be, grimly, both dislocational and marvelous. They are extravagant creations" (Chaudhuri). The beauty of the hats masks the horror beneath them, illustrating how violence and horror are deceptively far away. The performance gives attention to the enormous, colourful hats rather than the humans wearing them, highlighting the illusion of beauty and its role in distancing people from the harsh realities of the world. The parade scene is "an image of great beauty and great violence" (Ohldieck, 164), reflecting "the cruel alliance between violence and beauty" (156). This juxtaposition showcases violence as a strikingly beautiful image, where the fear traditionally associated with brutality melts away, reemerging instead as a hauntingly exquisite spectacle that enchants rather than frightens. Beauty can lead to a disregard for the realities of human existence, and the potential harms that arise from such a disconnection. The hats may appear visually appealing or artistic, but they carry a darker message about superficiality,

neglect of reality, and the potential harm that comes when art or design becomes detached from human experience and material conditions.

This treatment of bodies reflects broader themes of power dynamics and moral decay. Brecht's theatrical techniques and Foucault's theories on power, knowledge, and the body have significantly shaped Churchill's exploration of representation, particularly in terms of the limitations and ideologies surrounding the portrayal of female bodies in her work. Diamond suggests, "Brecht and Foucault provided Churchill with ideas and tropes that have shaped her concern with the body – limits of representation" (192). However, when confronted with the absurdity and brutality of oppression, Joan shifts from being a mere witness to becoming a complicit participant. Her lament, "[i]t seems so sad to burn them with the bodies" (Churchill 9), reflects her concern with the destruction of inanimate objects over the actual lives being lost. Joan is shocked by the idea that the hats are destroyed and burned with the bodies, rather than preserved or kept in a museum. Her unsettling preoccupation with the loss of the hats, rather than the tragic deaths of the individuals, reveals her struggle to confront the true horror of the situation.

In *Far Away*, Churchill raises profound questions about the nature of violence and its relationship to terror: Which one causes the other? Which one feeds the other? And specifically, what happens to terror when no violence is in view? These two concepts are tested in her play. Violence is a recurring theme that plays a central role in postmodern literature and drama, providing a dense critique of the contemporary world we inhabit. Churchill's play centres around the notions of violence, cruelty, and terror, making it an ideal example for researchers to investigate her work from this perspective. As a result, discussions of violence in Churchill's plays are not in themselves innovative, given the substantial body of scholarship that has explored this theme across her oeuvre. Miruna Ciocoi-Pop, for example, analyses *Far Away* "from the point of view of Churchill's chief topic: power as a tool of abuse, and violence as an inherent human trait" (Ciocoi-Pop 48). This highlights how Churchill frames violence not merely as individual acts but as a systemic and almost inevitable expression of human power dynamics. Similarly, Mary Luckhurst demonstrates in *Caryl Churchill* that "the thematic agendas of Churchill's plays repeatedly address war, genocide... cruelty and violence" (5), underscoring the systemic and pervasive nature of violence within her dramaturgy. These analyses foreground the socio-political and ethical dimensions of her work, urging audiences to confront cruelty and its broader implications.

In contrast, my study departs from these approaches by foregrounding the phenomenological and spatial dimensions of violence. I argue that Churchill deliberately precludes any reconciliation between violence and terror. Instead, terror arises from the disorienting spatiality and orientation of bodies. The spectator's encounter with violence at a distance creates a disjunction that inhibits empathetic engagement, rendering the corporeal suffering of characters both affectively and perceptually abstract. In this way, terror is spatially and emotionally distanced, transformed from a directly apprehensible experience into a mediated, conceptualised force. This reveals how Churchill's postdramatic strategies problematise conventional modes of audience identification and ethical response. For the characters, terror exists behind their perceptible horizon, illusively distanced from them, transforming it into background noise, a normal aspect of life. Over time, the horrors that once inspired terror can become background noise, a normal part of life that people no longer react to with the same urgency.

"so at last I put one foot in the river"⁸

This section examines the third act, where Joan undergoes a pivotal transformation that reclaims her sensory experience. In this moment, she not only acknowledges her body's intrinsic connection to the environment but also illustrates how her corporeal existence actively perceives and interacts with the physical world around her. The significant actions taken by Joan catalyse a profound shift in her perception of both violence and the broader world. This act of the play is set several years later, again in Harper's house, in a world where everything seems to be at war: "and it ends up with a vision of a planet consumed by conflict in which not merely every country is enlisted but also every species of animal and even the elements themselves" (Billington). It is an apocalyptic and surrealistic war: "there were piles of bodies and if you stopped to find out there was one killed by coffee or one killed by pins, they were killed by heroin, petrol, chainsaws, hairspray, bleach, foxgloves, the smell of smoke was where we were burning the grass that wouldn't serve" (Churchill 12). In a compelling argument, Aston states: "This is a bleak vision for a new century, but one that brings a renewed emphasis to Churchill's concern to show just how 'frightening' the legacy of a world damaged by a political and social creed of self-interest is – a legacy that, her theatre tells us, is not so very 'far away'. Rather, despite our unwillingness to look, unless we begin to

question and to act in the interests of social change, it is moving ever closer and more clearly into view" (120).

The "frightening legacy" calls for the need to confront uncomfortable truths about violence in society. This perspective echoes the idea that ignoring and not acting upon violence will only allow it to grow. Therefore, failure to perceive and address violence will continue to bring it into sharper focus. Violence breeds terror inside Joan, especially when she is personally affected, which, in turn, generates fear-driven actions at both individual and collective levels. Moreover, Aston comments on the necessity of action to start questioning the status quo. Essentially, the importance of perception, awareness, and engagement in social issues is emphasised. *Far Away* ends with Joan initiating an action, which exemplifies the Ponty-esque body as an active participant, where perception and movement are intertwined in shaping reality. She steps away from all the pre-existing reflections and performs her own movement, emphasising the interplay between bodies and the environment: "I put one foot in the river. It was very cold but so far that was all. When you've just stepped in you can't tell what's going to happen. The water laps around your ankles in any case" (Churchill 12). When Joan encounters the river, she hesitates, uncertain whether it constitutes a threat. She steps forward as "the water laps around your ankles anyway" (12). In this moment, Joan confronts the tension between fear and action, choosing to engage with her environment despite potential danger, thereby asserting agency through the negotiation of risk.

Joan's transformation illustrates a return to the primal, lived experience of the body, grounding herself through bodily movement in space. Her action of putting one foot into the river is a declaration of an immediate, embodied experience that is central to understanding the world. This embodiment enables her to adapt, respond, and assert herself, no longer defined solely by social constructs or by what her aunt suggests to her. In this chaotic and apocalyptic world, she is no longer just acted upon by external forces; instead, she is actively engaged with her surroundings. This engagement calls for a heightened awareness of her body and actions, allowing her to redefine her agency and existence within the fabric of the world. Moreover, the coldness of the water is a sensory experience that goes beyond mere observation; it is felt, and through this sensation, she connects with the world around her.

The act of stepping into the river can be seen as a metaphorical movement from the false safety of the domestic sphere (where certainty and comfort typically reside) into the broader, more unpredictable world. It signifies an

engagement with a different spatial reality, the cold, flowing water contrasts with the solid ground of the domestic space. *Far Away* is profoundly infused with physicality and movement, where the literal journey of Joan, from her bed to a landscape of war, mirrors a deeper, metaphorical transition from utopia to dystopia. Joan's physical movement, from the beginning of the play to the end, uncovers the false safety of her world and reveals a raw, dark reality beneath.

Conclusion

In *Far Away*, I read Churchill's portrayal of violence, perception, and space through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Joan's embodied movements within shifting environments reveal how violence is not merely external but an embodied experience, shaped by proximity and bodily orientation. As Joan navigates the spaces around her, her understanding of violence evolves, shifting from something immediate to an abstract, mediated concept. By emphasising the interplay between body, perception, and space, this analysis demonstrates how Churchill's work challenges conventional views of reality. Joan's movements expose the fluid, subjective nature of perception, destabilising traditional ideas of safety and truth. Through this reading, *Far Away* becomes a profound exploration of how our physicality shapes both our understanding of violence and our place in the world.

Endnotes

1. Merleau-Ponty argued that perception is fundamentally embodied, and is deeply rooted in the individual's physical presence in the world, "rather than a mind and a body, man is a mind with a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things" (*The World of Perception* 43). This complex relationship highlights how physical being, senses, embodiment, and physical interactions with the world, shape the perception of reality and the construction of meaning.
2. Merleau-Ponty integrates the pivotal role of the human body into the equation of perception. He argues against Cartesian dualism and positivism, asserting that perception is intrinsically tied to bodily experiences in shaping cognitive processes, suggesting: "all knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of*

- Perception* 241). For him, “[i]t is not because I think I am that I am certain of my existence: on the contrary the certainty I enjoy concerning my thoughts stems from their genuine existence” (445).
3. The Three Ponty-esque Problems refer to key concepts from Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy: body, perception, and space, that I will apply to analyse *Far Away*. These ideas focus on the body as the primary site of perception and interaction with the world, where embodied experience shapes how we understand violence, reality, and the spaces we inhabit. The body is not just a vessel but an active participant in perceiving and engaging with the environment; perception is thus always embodied, and space is not merely physical but lived and experienced through the body’s movement within it.
 4. This quote is from Churchill’s *Far Away*, pages 2–3.
 5. “Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between the objective body that can be examined by the physician and treated by chemical means. But this is not precisely the same body as my body for me as lived from within. Rather my body for me is seen to be the means by which I am situated in a world. It is also that by which I am able to perceive a world. Thus the body for me or the lived body is that by means of which I am part of the world and at the same time that by means of which I have a perspective on the world. The perspectival character of perceptual objects has as a counterpart the situated character of acts of perceiving because of their participating in the situated character of the body. Thus the lived body is that ambiguous reality which is not identical with the subject – it is not the subject but rather the means by which the subject is a real subject in a real world – but neither is it the same as external objects, for no other object in our experience is lived from within.” (Fisher, 12).
 6. This quote is from Churchill’s *Far Away*, page 4.
 7. This quote is from Ohldieck’s *The Aesthetics of Violence*, page 164.
 8. This quote is from Churchill’s *Far Away*, page 13.

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