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Dramatising austerity: holding a story together (and why it falls apart . . .)

Ruth Raynor

Abstract

A group of women in the North East of England; women getting on and getting by amidst austerity. But what does austerity become for these women? How does it surface and register in their everyday lives through a series of fragmented encounters? Together, we developed a fictional play to explore how austerity acted in the midst of other things. Effects ranged from the un-dramatic to the intense – from an empty flowerbed at the end of the street to service closure and a loss of support. How then to ‘evoke’ austerity in this article and through the narrative form of a play? Does austerity become atmospheric like smog – something cold and wet settled over the place? Like a coercive character making demands she cannot meet? Or a particular pattern of relations between event and effect: a plot that falls apart? Our attempts at dramatisation revealed austerity’s fracturing and dissonance. Austerity sapped women’s energy to flourish through existing attachments to one another, to family life and to other forms of unpaid care; it made promises it couldn’t keep; it disorientated. As austerity differently met and co-constituted the lives of women, it disrupted opportunity for collective experience so that even austerity was not commonly encountered. In that context, I work through the play and the process in its development to explore what we held together and what continued to fall apart. Story then works hard in this article. It becomes a promise of momentum towards resolution, an affective mechanism that organises lives in the chaos after financial crisis, a longed-for form for a coproduced play and a theory that might make some sense of why anti-austerity imaginaries were not coherently attached to at least by women in this process.

Keywords

Austerity, Precarity, Women, Representation, Theatre

Introduction: coproducing story

A women’s group is closing. Lesley, the leader, is under pressure. She wants to tell them but things keep getting in the way. Time is running out. If Geordie Bruce Willis can’t help, and Noel Edmonds is no good either, who will save the day? This play is about finding light through the rubble and the mess. It’s about avoiding promises of a better life that actually makes things worse and searching for moments of laughter and understanding in the noise and confusion.

Synopsis for ‘DieHard Gateshead’, a play written by Ruth Raynor, developed with a women’s group in the North East of England as part of an extended research project combining drama workshops, participant observation and interviews from 2011 (performed July 2015).

I do not make a case in this article for the place of stories in the discipline of geography.¹ Instead, I *show* a place for story in the discipline of geography as I produce and explore ‘research’ that is also ‘creative practice’.² I tell a story about making a story – using drama – with a women’s group in the North East of England.³ And I tell a story about austerity – about women trying to hold things together even as they continue to fall apart. These women live in a supposedly ‘deprived’ region impacted by rhythms of withdrawal through de-industrialisation.⁴ They are all mothers, all out of paid work or in low paid, part-time or temporary employment and variously subject to intensified processes of social and economic precarisation.⁵ Together we made a fictional

play informed by and attempting to ‘capture and evoke’⁶ women’s everyday encounters with austerity. We did so among other narratives that circulated, that held purchase, that co-constituted austerity and lives amidst austerity in the United Kingdom.

This article, then, pushes against Mitch Rose’s suggestion that ‘stories and empirics [always] do different things’. For Rose,

theory’s role is not just to make sense (this is the role of any story) but to make sense in a manner that allows world and word to correlate; to mediate a correspondence where the gap between event and narrative is bridged by the illuminative power of theoretical coherence⁷

(although irony infuses the phrase ‘illuminative power’). Rose suggests that ‘stories, however, acknowledge a certain distance. They do not endeavour (nor claim) to represent reality although they certainly attempt to capture something real’.⁸ More than this, stories from the field provide the *conditions* for thought. They are not only ‘empirical evidence’, enlightened by and substantiating a theory, but instead they are integral to the thinking involved in doing and writing research.⁹

Developing from this subversion of authorship, I question the notion that story might have a clear point of origin and I engage with a process of thinking and doing story and research together through praxis. Furthermore, I show what, through story, we could capture and evoke about austerity. Collaborators and I used drama as a method to create a fictional play with a narrative structure.¹⁰ This involved a process of trying (failing in different, sometimes better ways) to obtain a bridge to or ‘cor- relation’ with women’s experiences in austerity. Such correlation was mediated by fiction, and fiction enabled a depth of mutual exploration that may not otherwise have been afforded. In this case, through a series of techniques such as role-play, hot-seating, ‘time-lining’¹¹ and ‘roll on the wall’,¹² we developed characters and situations informed by women’s expertise. Women could speak, act and perform on behalf of a fictional character and in doing so reveal intimate experiences with or without giving personal context.¹³ This informed the development of a written script, which was twice ‘played-back’ to collaborators for comments. The thought- and sense-provoking consequences of this process supported the generation of the play as well as other research material (reflections on the process, observations, recorded conversations and photographs). Here, I draw on those materials in an attempt at correspondence between the events (of austerity) and the narrative (of the play). The bridge that this story creates may be affective or atmospheric – no closer or more distant than other forms of ‘narrative’ or ‘theoretical’ bridge. And form folds into content in this article as it did in the play. In both I use form to ‘get at’ how austerity affected and effected the lives of women in

diffuse and disparate ways. I evoke how we tried to hold things together as we attempted to make a story that would make coherent 'sense' of women's encounters with austerity – but the plot kept falling apart. And women and characters in the play tried to hold coherency in their own lives together amidst the fracturing reforms of austerity, but things kept falling apart.

Austerity¹⁴ enacts the (contested¹⁵) premise that a state's fiscal deficit can and should be reduced through a series of spending cuts for the good of public finance. This has translated into a range of budget cuts and reforms in the United Kingdom since 2010, which have significantly impacted already 'disadvantaged' groups¹⁶ including women.¹⁷ However, the complexity of those cuts and reforms means that even in a supposedly shared 'demographic', austerity touched women's lives in different ways, at different times and in different places. For example, austerity surfaced as one woman was moved from 'Income Support' to 'Jobseeker's Allowance', as a mother and daughter noticed an empty flowerbed at the end of the street, as a taxi no longer took a disabled child to school, in the implementation of the 'bedroom tax' and a threatened eviction,¹⁸ in a closed autism support group, and a choice between food and heating. It became clear that micro-situational differences mattered to the effects of austerity and that specific cuts or reforms should be understood in relation to one another as well as in context as they intensified the precarisation of already economically marginalised lives.

Drama offered a space for us to share and explore the multiple effects of austerity amidst other relations, and by using this method, I contribute to a growing field in theatre-geography and broader work at the intersections of research and creative practice flourishing in a 'creative turn' in human geography.¹⁹ Geographers have utilised potential in theatre for embodied coproduction, as well as for disseminating research;²⁰ however, opportunity for exploring the muddy lines between 'fiction' and 'empirics' in theatre-geography is missing to date.²¹ Drama techniques enable the weaving of theory, empirics and creativity in particular ways. To show the significance of this, my emphasis here is on what ways of thinking/doing story might tell us, show us and make us feel about women's lived experiences of austerity. And so, if for Rose story becomes 'always a gift from others' whereby 'it is not us who give the other a voice it is they who give us ours',²² what took place in this process was the coproduction of both story and research facilitated by the meeting and mingling of multiple forces,²³ including objects, images, moments of re-enactment, the 'dusty blue room' in which we developed the drama, the weather, techniques, our desires and so on. This 'mingling' of forces matters. It implies that stories don't always have a clear point of origin. We are/ were all open to difference, and by acting in a space of mutual vulnerability together, we could develop a voice – a story that was not only yours, not only mine, but yours and mine together.

Forces of austerity narrative

A (tired) scene:

Where is the fairness, we ask, for the shift-worker leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?²⁴

Before describing how those complex and diverse relations with austerity became present in our play through three devices – setting, character and plot – I show the capacity of story through dominant narratives in UK austerity. If stories are a force in the organisation of lives, then which stories hold purchase and why becomes important.²⁵ A number of stories constituting a contemporary austerity genre already exist, already govern and already move women in particular ways. Beyond an ideological fiscal program,²⁶ austerity in the United Kingdom also has a cultural life, an emotional, affective and atmospheric life.²⁷ Stories have a generative and a sense-making role in those complex lives of austerity, and I argue that austerity stories circulate and grow exactly because of their affective resonance. So when cuts are justified by the notion that ‘the national budget is equivalent to a house-hold budget’,²⁸ perhaps this engenders solidarity with, and some- how removes an affective burden from, families struggling with household debt. It is surely com- forting to imagine a large and unwieldy financial structure on the domestic scale? Similarly, austerity nostalgia rings through comments repeated regularly and publicly by members of the governing party such as ‘we’re all in this together’, ‘tighten the purse strings’ and ‘get on your bike’. This evokes a post-war imaginary and in doing so exemplifies longing for security and sta- bility in hard times.²⁹ However contestable the notion that austerity was lived as a positive experi- ence in the 1940s, a post-war austerity scene evokes affirmative qualities such as stoicism, collectivity and taking things in order.³⁰ Relatedly, Forkert suggests that government austerity rhetoric involves a quasi-religious discourse in which cuts become necessary to redeem the coun- try’s remorse of apparent extravagance through the years of New Labour (1997–2010).³¹ This reso- nates with classic tales of guilt and redemption. Through these framings, austerity assumes an archetypal narrative structure. It becomes a force towards resolution (and absolution) of wrong- doing, a way to feel that ‘things are being put right’. Austerity offers an opportunity for momentum towards ‘a brighter future’.³² Heroes and villains who support or prevent that momentum are sig- nificant in this story too, most commonly ‘the worker’ and ‘the shirker’. Stigma and discrimination become attached to those ‘characters’ as broad moral judgements circulate in government rhetoric and mainstream media about how other people should behave and what kinds of social contribu- tion are deemed to be valued.³³ This story both legitimates widespread cuts and reforms to infra- structural support for people out of paid work and evokes a

sense of disciplining and taking control, which might be felt as necessary in this historical present.

This story has made deep roots in the United Kingdom in part because it was unchallenged by the primary opposing political party for several years,³⁴ but also because it creates an *impression* of trajectory towards resolution after the harms of financial crisis. Arguably this taps into a public sense that neoliberal capitalism is out of control in a context of failed promises of social equality, upward mobility and home ownership³⁵ while paradoxically evoking the cruel promise that austerity ‘disciplines’ or takes control of such excess. If certain promises of neoliberalism are fraying, these accounts of austerity ‘make sense’ of that fraying and enable continued attachments to those promises by galvanising the notion that discipline now will allow for a ‘brighter future’ later on. Therefore, austerity’s dominant narrative appropriates, organises, generates and frames public feeling. It performs a ‘sense-making’ facility that evokes clarity from the chaos and disorder of financial crisis. As it does so, it sustains and enables actions that contradict the very same framings. Not least since we in the United Kingdom are clearly not ‘all in it together’,³⁶ we are not ‘taking control of fiscal excess’³⁷ and contemporary UK austerity which oversees the corrosion of the welfare state is nothing like that of the 1940s, which oversaw its expansion.³⁸ Telling a story with women about how *they* encounter austerity matters in this context. This prioritises women’s own felt landscapes in relation to austerity and attempts to understand how austerity narratives have become enrolled into those landscapes. Therefore, through an exploration of setting, character and plot, and drawing on our own process using drama as method, this article uses story and theory together to constitute austerity otherwise. It works through the complexity of the cuts and reforms of austerity as they were encountered in women’s everyday lives. It asks, against a backdrop of the dissonant and paradoxical narratives of austerity, what for these particular women can be held together and what falls apart? What rhythms of holding together and falling apart coexist and what if anything might this tell us about the specific ways in which austerity becomes lived, for these women, in the everyday?

Our austerity narrative

Setting the scene: on atmospheres of austerity

Katy:

Sandra: Katy: Rosie: Katy: Sandra: Katy:

Em . . . aye . . . right well, it sounds a bit daft but there’s these two circles full of flowers round where we live. The kids like smelling them, but this year the whole thing’s just been dug over. It looks dead sad now. Nee flowers. Is that it? Nee

flowers?

Aye. Anyway we planted some more. And then I got a warning of the council didn't I . . . You what? Health and safety. We're not gonna get much drama out of flowers are we Katy?

Well sorry my life isn't more exciting Sandra. (Final Draft: 'DieHard Gateshead' 2015)

In geography, affective atmospheres and ambiances have been given increasing attention as a way of considering 'the contingent outcomes of a multiplicity of relations between techniques, technologies, practices, materiality, sociality and much more';³⁹ as 'moody force fields in the making and shaping of collective publics';⁴⁰ and as a 'diffuse quality of environmental immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies'.⁴¹ If investment in momentum towards a 'brighter future' cruelly promised by austerity occurs alongside the dismantling of the 'safety net' of the welfare state, perhaps this resonates into a dissonant atmosphere of austerity. But was this felt in scenes in our research? As I walked towards the community support service, I encountered empty shops and houses, development projects put on hold, adults and young people hanging around. And later, I felt the anticipation that 'things' would inevitably 'get worse' for the service in which our project was embedded. Did these encounters also amount to an affective atmosphere of austerity,⁴² and how through the setting and action in the play might we capture or evoke this atmosphere?

I thought at first of smog: a cold haze settled over the place. Smog, smoke, pollution, fumes, gas, human effects that escape their cause. Sometimes austerity escapes its cause too, sometimes its sources are difficult to identify, it gets everywhere, it disorients, it settles, it muddies connections between us, I try to grab it and it escapes. It is breathed and gets inside, it sticks to the lungs.

Its harm escalates.

Through a series of slight and more intense encounters, I felt the reforms of austerity as a kind of neglect or abandonment in a region already suffering from loss of industry. Other participants evoked this too. For Hannah, 'Well it's just, the streets and everything aren't as clean as what they used to be, it's just rubbish everywhere isn't it? Cos it's not getting cleaned as much and different things like that'. For Claire, 'The flowers! I'm absolutely gutted about the flowers . . . and what they've started to do is not cut the grass . . . (so) you can't play on it'.⁴³ For Jane, 'There's no jobs around and no activities for the kids like there was before'.⁴⁴ This suggested a steady stream of small or larger interruptions to paid work, unpaid parenting and other practices involved in

‘getting on and getting by’. But did these encounters produce a diffusely felt atmosphere like smog – a feeling of something cloying and grey settled over the place?

Certainly, where that something began or ended was not always clear. For example, take Jane’s comment that there were ‘no jobs’. Despite recent depletion of the public sector, a significant source of employment in the North East after de-industrialisation, it is difficult to coherently attribute changing relations with work, neglect and abandonment, singularly to ‘austerity’. Women had experienced such changes and withdrawals in different ways before. For example, several recalled moving from factory to factory (usually sewing or small component manufacture) over years or even decades, until the last of those factories ‘went abroad’. Hannah summarised this when she suggested,

That’s all the work there was, there was adverts and jobs coming up all of the time for machinists and I worked in the Levis factory. When I was 21 I was made redundant from Levis. They shut them all down – people who’d worked there from when they were 16 – and they were in their 40’s 50’s and 60’ and they had nothing – nowhere to go and nothing else to do.⁴⁵

In addition to having muddled boundaries and complicated causal relations, a grey wet atmosphere was often broken or disturbed – by a job offer, by a community event, by belief in the promise of ‘fiscal responsibility’, by women’s refusal to see their world in such a disheartened way. For some, at the time of our research, this part of Gateshead felt optimistic, sunny – ‘like a village or community, nice’ (Tania). And when I asked participants directly about austerity, several replied along the same lines as Bella: ‘I haven’t got the first idea cos I don’t even know what it means . . . I don’t read the papers, that’s a good start isn’t it’. Or, ‘no, no I’m not affected by it no not at all’ (Hannah), although they often proceeded to show the contrary. It was not only that the effects of austerity were felt or encountered other than how those effects were named and registered as austerity. It was also that women engaged differently with what happened here, and what appeared to happen elsewhere and so the individuated relations with austerity did not translate into a coherent atmosphere. For example, for Claire, ‘. . . I’m just trying to think about all the different cuts . . . nothing affects me on a really, really serious level, you know . . .’ Or for Hannah, ‘not really directly em, cos I haven’t got to worry about the bedroom tax and anything like that’. A number of participants narrated reforms impacting other people or threats for future change, sometimes with a weak sense of justice or injustice, often tipping into indifference. Somehow those other stories failed to leave a significant impression.

But where a change to the terms of welfare – the bedroom tax – became background for some participants, something that “doesn’t really effect me”, it was violently foregrounded for others. For example, for Robyn,

Don’t talk about the fucking bedroom tax that’s all I’ve got to say, bastards [. . .] this is where I live this is where me friends are, this is where I know em, and it’s like I’ve made this me home.

If the affects of austerity are specific to different women – even in a shared demographic – can we still think of austerity as a single atmosphere or mood (like smog) that might engulf UK publics in a particular way? At the time of this research, austerity was not felt or related to by women as a shared encounter or a coherent mood. Those encounters were experienced differently and discordantly over space and time. Austerity operated – it seemed – as a series of fractured encounters with fracturing effects. Smog became too uniform, then, to evoke these dynamic textures of austerity.

Austerity cannot be fully registered by one kind of atmosphere – smog – in such a way that it becomes a coherent setting for action in our play. This doesn’t fully evoke the dynamic ways in which austerity became present and touched the lives of women: as a shock from the outside – in the loss of a job or threat to a home; as a background sense of abandonment – in unclean streets; or in a push to return to work. Furthermore, austerity as smog doesn’t capture austerity’s seductiveness – its felt rewards, the promises it appropriates. By this I mean how at times women appeared attached to the ideas of sacrifice, thrift and regaining control of a national budget. Perhaps, then, the coherence of smog (even as it alludes to an erosion of coherence) fails to evoke how situations escape their atmospheres, which in turn escape the limits of the labels they are given. Atmospheres can lay dormant, surface, rub alongside their contraries. Therefore, to work as a device, austerity as atmosphere in the play must be more than shades of one colour (grey) or shades of one texture (slightly wet). Austerity shifts its shape – it is open to its outside, it is dynamic.

If austerity as smog is too diffuse and regular, is it possible to dramatise atmospheres of austerity that include disruptions, optimisms and indifference? In the play, a phone goes unanswered, a problem goes unaddressed, there is hope unfulfilled and a declaration of sadness that now there are ‘nee flowers’. These fragments build like austerity in the midst of other things. It was not a grey wetness that settled; however, austerity did surface in the play atmospherically as a series of forces that affected the way characters inhabited space, sometimes limiting, sometimes restricting a woman’s capacity to act. However, atmospheres alone were not enough to get at what austerity was or what austerity did. It is not only that no single atmosphere could evoke

austerity or that other atmospheres might exceed and proceed women's relations with austerity. It is also that austerity became present in ways other than a diffuse atmosphere or surrounding, for example, the shock from the outside, the rumble in the background, the slow deterioration of conditions and the contradictions of displaced optimism. And if the paradoxical, individuated and individuating effects and affects of austerity could and could not quite be evoked by an atmosphere in the play, we could explore those dynamics otherwise through characters and their relationships. This offered an alternative insight into the relations between austerity and women that built on austerities' affective and material dynamics.

Character: coercive strategies of austerity

From left to right: Christina Dawson 'Katy', Jessica Johnson 'Sandra' and Arabella Arnott 'Julia' in 'Diehard Gateshead', *Alphabetti Theatre*, June 2015. Image Source: Matt Jamie Photography.

Sandra: What?

Gary: H'away.

Sandra: What?

Gary: I've got a surprise for you . . .

Sandra: I can't.

Gary: What d' y' mean?

Sandra: I promised Katy,

Gary: You said . . . (*lets quiet hang*)

Sandra: Sorry, look, I haven't seen her all week. I can meet you in an hour?
(*Pause, he looks at her*)

Gary: You lot have fun then . . . smile lasses, it might never happen! (*He heads towards the door, slips on some water and stumbles . . . he looks up to find the source of the leak*)

Gary: Fucking clip of this place . . .

(Draft: Cracks 2012)

'Benefits claimants' like many of the women engaged in our project are some of the most vilified 'characters' in a contemporary UK austerity story.⁴⁶ Scenes described in the previous section- 'Forces of austerity narrative' show how the governing party nurtures such vilifications and justify radical cuts and reforms to welfare. However, we could tell a different story about women on benefits through the form of a play. We could show singularity, hopes and struggles, barriers to employment, commitments to unpaid care and other forms of peer support. And we could subvert constitutions of women as 'villains' in a story to think about character otherwise. A number of women suggested how for them the welfare state acts as a stand-in partner and co-parent. But what kind of partner would the austere state make?

His harm is spatially expansive. He is in the home, on the bus, outside school. He disrupts friendships. He buys her flowers then expects something she cannot give in return. He closes down her choices. And so to get at a combination of dynamics – the shock from the outside, a rumble in the background, the pressure to fulfil unreachable obligations that women described and enacted in relation to austerity – I/we considered the contemporary austere state as a controlling spouse. Through the accumulative impacts of welfare and service cuts, the increasing contingency of support and associated vilification, close control and intimidation created by the austere state mirror emotional, psychological and material dynamics of domestic abuse. If we consider how relations with the state become 'familial' as they embed themselves in everyday domestic spaces, then we might locate the dynamics of 'coercive control'⁴⁷ in and through the character 'austerity'.

Through this character, we can consider what lies beneath the cracked smile that austerity wears in public. And this may help us to raise and perhaps address the question: How does he entrap her, how does he seduce her? What does austerity do to break her ability to act?

As Stark puts it in relation to coercive control,

The primary harm abusive men inflict is political, not physical, and reflects the deprivation of rights and resources that are critical to personhood and citizenship . . .⁴⁸

For collaborators in this process, such subordination might be associated with stigmatisation, the psychology of workfare,⁴⁹ interruptions to unpaid care and the withdrawal of peer, voluntary and professional support. These effects are fractured and dispersed; they act on different women differently, as each comes into contact with reforms or withdrawals that are contingent on their own unique circumstances. And this dispersal of effects becomes part of a dynamic of control. For Stark, coercive control is an assemblage of multiple encounters that produce social and spatial entrapment, the silencing and belittling of things survivors find important, intimidation and humiliation. This gives an account of how personal forms of abuse are supported and sustained by the concrete and complex social relations of power in which, in this case, women are immersed. Why is her unpaid care work increasingly de-valued? To what extent are her choices closed down, how is she 'encouraged' into paid work (that is not suitable or available) or made to decide upon heating or food? Coercive control illuminates the damaging accumulative effect of reforms and cuts that may seem slight when taken out of a broader context. Take Robyn's relation with 'the bedroom tax'. This loss of income seems insignificant for those with a larger wage, but when combined with losses from the council tax reform,⁵⁰ it has pushed Robyn to decide at times between food and heating and still face eviction. Simultaneously, she is effected by the withdrawal of public services, as money is leached from local libraries, leisure centres and she faces increasing pressure from the Jobcentre to move into paid work. The forces of change in Robyn's life are multiple. Spaces of refuge are lost. Some people might suggest that Robyn take a lodger, move to a smaller property and/or get a job in order to resolve this situation: they might suggest that she is a 'shirker' and that she 'brings this on herself'. But those expectations fail to account for other contexts, for example, that there is an insufficient supply of smaller properties, that three or four times a week Robyn's granddaughter stays over (taking the other room) so that her daughter can remain in paid work, the importance of support structures embedded in the place that she had lived for more than 30 years, that she has struggled to find suitable paid work in a de-industrialised region, that she lost several jobs as factories closed over time and that she wasn't re-employed after maternity leave. By taking account of those other situations, we see that Robyn is pushed to realise un-actionable actions or

made to face the consequences: a dynamic of entrapment. Those supposedly 'small' changes enacted by austerity escalate and intensify existing situations of precarity and in doing so 'wear' Robyn 'down'.

A character in one draft of the play stole money from the character Sandra's purse, he told her what to wear and she was unable to leave. As in austerity, this diffuse kind of violence made protest or other forms of resistance harder to enact. The drama-making method enabled us to explore some of those dynamics in relation to austerity. For example, using time-lines for fictional characters in the play, we could think more about how historic violence against these women became enrolled into the effects of austerity in the contemporary. Women developed a character that had lost her job as a result of de-industrialisation and never found a replacement – she had recently divorced and was alone without work or qualifications. This enabled us to imagine a character's world beyond moments of encounter or scenes in the play, and we could better understand how broader harms and histories became folded into encounters with austerity in the present.

Furthermore, we created a number of scenes using improvised role-play to place those characters into situations that were informed by collaborators' expertise. These creative inventions did not always 'represent' the accurate minutia of participants' experiences, but rather they evoked a feeling or a dynamic: sometimes surfacing as coercion. For example, the Jobcentre scene was particularly striking as it captured intimidation, humiliation and the belittling of things that were important to the character Sandra:

Katy: The number's incorrect.

Sandra: Well can you not ring across or something?

Katy: It's not my problem.

Sandra: But, she gave me the wrong number . . .

Katy: It's not my problem . . .

Sandra: But, well, I mean . . . she's getting hungry (*starts rocking her arms as though with a baby*)

Katy: Are you refusing to comply?

Sandra: Well no but . . .

Katy: You need to get another number.

Sandra: I can't

Katy: Are you refusing to comply?

Sandra: Well no . . .

Katy: You need to get another number.

Sandra: I've already got a number Katy The number is incorrect,

Sandra: For god's sake

Katy: Are you speaking to a member of staff in an abusive manner?

Sandra: No

Katy: The queue is over there . . .

(Draft: Cracks 2013)

Sandra's objectives to meet her care responsibilities were blocked by other processes as her reasoning and choices were closed down. Her actions did not and could not realise their desired effects, and yet she continued on. There was something in that call for Sandra to make an un- decidable decision that resonated beyond the scene. Although these words did not make it into the final script, the dynamic of entrapment, the closing down of her choices and the rendering of her as somehow singularly accountable for her own situation became significant for how the play attempted to dramatise austerity.

When we paused the improvisation to ask the character questions including 'what do you feel and what do you want?' Emma who was playing the part of Sandra, answered as follows: 'I feel frustrated, I want to get out of there, I feel like the things that are important to me don't matter'.⁵¹ Bella stated, 'Next it'd be like that thingy (Auschwitz) just take them and their kids all down and shoot em'. Participants mentioned feeling shame surfacing in a range of spaces, including on the bus, outside school, at home, in comments from acquaintances, friends and even strangers. But stigma was rarely discussed freely, critically or coherently. More often in a dynamic that also resonated with the dynamics of 'coercive control' women turned violent rhetoric on to themselves and each other. For example, Jane would be moved from Income Support to Jobseeker's Allowance as her son turned 5. She had made 300 applications and received five interviews, and she asked me 'why should I get a benefit for sitting round doing nowt when other people got to go and work?' Furthermore, Bella, a single mum who had moved from a well-paid job into unemployment after suffering from a mental health breakdown, stated,

I've turned into what I despised when I was working . . . ten years on the tables turned and I am that person, I am the single parent, I am the em . . . housing association home, em . . . why should I get a benefit for sitting round doing nowt when other

people's got to go and work? So . . . do you know what I mean, the, the, government's allowed me to stay at home with my children and for that I'm very thankful.

Although some women may imagine the austere state as a stand-in partner – penetrating the home, family life and other social spaces – it operates through a series of fragmented encounters. For example, Local Authorities, third-sector organisations and the local Jobcentre become the interface for women's relations with 'austerity'. This muddies who and what women understand themselves to be in relation to, moving 'austerity' beyond an intimate relation between two characters, to a dissonant set of relations between many. This multiplicity further closes down imaginaries for an exit from those less specific, more diverse relations of control. They make a trajectory towards resolution seem difficult or impossible to imagine. Therefore, in relation to 'an austere state', lines between the 'inside' and 'outside' became blurred. Solutions or escapes became temporary and often folded back into this thing austerity. This does not run counter to Stark's account of coercive control and patriarchy, which exceed and precede specific moments of encounter and even specific relationships. As with austerity, in relation to coercive control, 'getting out' often becomes much more complex than exiting a particular relationship. Although so often women felt that they were lacking and should change, it is austerity and not those women who should be held to account for its harms.

Therefore, Stark's account of coercion enables me to consider how controlling relationships resonate with dynamics in the austerity genre and how broader social formations might support or sustain those controlling relationships. This perhaps 'gets at' the complex spatial multiplicity of abuse as a political dynamic of control. It gets at diffuse forms of harm that act in and through already unequal distributions of security. It evokes how a series of encounters, cuts and reforms escalate to wear the subject down. Thinking austerity through coercive control enabled us to explore subtle acts of entrapment, dissonance and discord that became part of what sustains control. Multiple forces of harm escalated and in doing so closed down a field of possibilities for women, belittled them and sometimes they blamed themselves for this. Although the coercive relationship was largely lost from the final script, exploring that relationship together provided a device for exploring dynamics of austerity. Furthermore, some feelings and forms of relation associated with those dynamics of control remained in the final script. The scene in which Sandra attends the Jobcentre shows how this surfaces at times as a form of disconnection between a character's intended actions and their effects. Sandra is trying to do the right thing for her daughter, but she is prevented from doing so and this resonated with women's experiences of the cuts and reforms of austerity. Next, then, through plot in the play, I think more about disconnections between actions and their effects for women in austerity.

Plot: fragmented objectives

(Judi Earl, 'Lesley' in 'DieHard Gateshead', *Alphabetti Theatre*, June 2015, Image Source: Matt Jamie Photography.).

Sandra: Right. (*Pause*) Well come on then Lesley. Spit it out. (*Pause, Lesley looks down at letter but picks up a book next to it on the desk*)

Lesley: Em . . . Well, what it is . . . Have you read this book?

Sandra: Cosmic ways to Change Your Life?

Lesley: You should read it Sandra.

Sandra: What, so this is what you wanted to tell iz?

Lesley: Erm, yes. Yes, it is.

Sandra: Noel Edmonds?

(*beat*) Final Draft 'DieHard Gateshead'

Typically, plot refers to actions, events and their effects in a script. Plot is not the same as 'story', which encompasses events as well as their excesses, including the emotional journey of characters, atmospheres, setting and how those excesses somehow hang together to 'make meaning' or perform a sensory and 'sense-making' mechanism.⁵² Therefore, in this section, I focus on plot but bear in mind that it is by thinking character, atmosphere and plot together that our story of austerity might begin to come together (or fall apart).

Given the multiple ways in which participants encountered austerity, one of the biggest challenges we faced was developing a plot that might make women's experiences of austerity coherent like those others stories that hold so much purchase in the United Kingdom. Unlike the dominant narrative of a heroic patriarch putting the household budget back into order to secure a 'brighter future' and villainous 'benefits scroungers' creating barriers to the resolution of that objective, we struggled to create a drama that was driven by a protagonist's overriding objective and barriers preventing her from fulfilling that objective. Reflecting the dynamics of the group, I had written an ensemble piece but criticism was consistently levelled at the play in development: 'we don't know whose story this is' and 'the events and effects are not causally connected'.⁵³ The plot kept falling apart. And that is a key point in this article: we don't know whose story it is and the events and effects of austerity don't always connect up for women – the plot does keep falling apart. 'Yes but dramatically that does not work'. It doesn't make a coherent story. In the version of script under scrutiny, we had attempted to dramatise how the multiple challenges in women's life were intensified by the effects of austerity. The story became confused. Was this Sandra's tale of emancipation from a harmful relationship with Gary, was it Katy's story as she struggled to care for her mum and her children, was it Julia's story of separation and bankruptcy, was it Rosie's story as she attempted to juggle the 'work life' balance or was it Lesley's story as she dealt with redundancy and deception? This risked leaving audiences lost – unable to relate enough to any 'journey' and therefore perhaps unable to fully invest in any of the characters' lives.

How, then, might we structure a plot with a coherent narrative structure; protagonist, objectives, barriers to the resolution of those objectives and in doing so tell a story about austerity that might resonate with women and public audiences? Furthermore, how to do this without reducing austerity beyond recognition? Setting the play in a women's group amidst its threatened closure promised to create a coherent relation between the event of austerity and effects of threatened/actualised closure. This would enable me to hold on to the 'ensemble' as characters were united by their connection through the group and its threatened loss. However, women in this process were not united by a common cause, either in the face of closure, or against the threats of austerity more broadly. Threatened closure of the women's service did not contain sufficient dramatic conflict to drive the plot forward. This is because while the event was coherent and represented other closures and service withdrawals, the effects of the event did not have enough intensity in isolation. To work as an affective plot device within this narrative convention, the centre and its closure had to really matter to the whole group. The event of closure must become a shock from the outside – one that threw characters off course, and initiated some kind of dramatic transformation. And while the draft script shows our attempts at making the group really matter – at least to Sandra and to Lesley – this did not fully resonate with how the cuts and reforms of austerity were described and encountered by women at the time of this research. This is because for these women, closures had become a normal event and not only amidst austerity. They had lost their ability to shock.

Collaborators certainly expressed appreciation for the women's group we all attended. For Bella, it was a

Life saver, absolute life saver, em . . . it just made us realise possibly how empty my family life and my kids family life was and that rather concentrate on what you haven't got than surround yourself with people that do have similar values and that are warm and that you do feel safe and secure around and in that way I say we pick our family we don't do you know what I mean, we don't we don't have blood family, we choose our family, that's, that's the way I look at things.

Despite this, for a number of reasons, Bella stopped coming to the group before it closed, and subsequently, many of her connections with other collaborators became frayed. For Tania,

I've lived here for well, six seven years or something is that right? But like, I've made like all my friends from (the group) that's where I know everybody from nowadays I can walk up the streets and know people. And I like it cos it's like a little wee community.

Despite this, Tania later mentioned that she did not know who she should contact for help when birthing her second child because those friendships

didn't (yet) feel quite strong enough to 'put anybody out'. This suggests the frailty of connections between women and the effects of togetherness that attendance at the group produced. Something that was valued, something that had important functions for the women is threatened; there is a sense of loss. And what is lost is choice – either to attend the group or not, according to a need. But the impact of this was diminished because closures were not exceptional for the women. Instead, they became with and folded into myriad other closures that had become typical in de-industrialisation. For one participant, Sarah, recent losses had included the loss of her husband's job, threats to the taxi service taking her disabled son to school, the loss of an autism support group, the loss of Disability Living Allowance for her mum, the loss of legal aid and other smaller losses and changes. Amidst the exhaustion of responding to and dealing with such losses, there was little energy left to fear the threat to a weekly women's group, or even to register the significance of all of those other losses. The normalisation of closure in a turbulent landscape of precaritisation was intensified in the midst of austerity as many things were lost, threatened or changed. These events in austerity are collectively, deeply significant, but in isolation they may not *feel* life changing or evental. Instead, their effects escalate in a dynamic akin to a 'slow death'.⁵⁴ Perhaps what is enacted here is the 'slow death' of the welfare state and infrastructures of support for these women.

Such exhausting rhythms of closure and loss impacted on women at different times, in different ways and in different places. In this context, it took a great deal of effort just to 'get on and get by'. For characters in the play and women in this process, promises of being 'outside' of the harms of austerity were invested in, but an end of austerity was not. This became a matter of coping. For example, an outside to pressures associated with reforms to Jobseeker's Allowance could be imagined in the promise of a job offer. But paid work may not be found, or precarious and low paid work may be as difficult and damaging as unemployment.⁵⁵ Promises and promises frayed of being outside the harms of austerity were multiple, incoherent and often worked in opposition with each other. Furthermore, women showed the extent to which other stories and scenes 'got inside' to frame women's relations with austerity: less immigrants, winning a council house bid, carefully balancing the budget, just getting on and getting by. I found these promises attached to in a way that some kind of alternative to austerity was not, at least at the time and place of my research.

In Gateshead, I found other moments of relief and displaced optimism where austerity was and was not present. Many women had or perceived themselves to have a detailed understanding of the various, individuated effects of specific welfare reforms even in the absence of 'austerity' as a shared or named event. This became tangled up with cycles of micro-othering and micro-care. For

example, Jane, a lone parent who was out of paid work and on benefits described three sub-categories of single parent on benefits:

I think sometimes there's to me there's different sets of single parents, like there's single parents just cos they want kids but they don't want a partner and there's single parents that you've been married for years and their marriage dissolves . . . and then like single parents that's you have a child at sixteen but they've never worked and we're all chucked in the same barrel . . . they don't take people's circumstances into situation.

Jane described this in relation to 'swollen belly syndrome', something she determined as a consequence of shifts in the terms for income support, so that once a child reaches the age of 5, a lone parent is moved from Income Support onto Jobseeker's Allowance.⁵⁶ Jane's theory was that women would avoid this shift by having another baby. This enabled Jane to separate herself from those 'other' kinds of single parents. Jane simultaneously berated herself for claiming Jobseeker's Allowance while other people 'have to work'. Perhaps the condemnation of women with 'swollen belly syndrome' offered the promise of being outside of austerity's more violent rhetoric. This way Jane could frame herself as a relatively less villainous character in the austerity story.

The inverse also played out and rubbed alongside this. For example, Hannah stated,

It's just sad when you hear about people and they're having to move out of their houses and they haven't got anywhere to move to that is smaller . . .

Hannah recognised that harm to others was personal. However, despite noting these injustices, Hannah did not feel able or compelled to act in any way. She was too busy getting on and getting by. Again, there was no sense of the possibility that momentum towards resolution could, in this case, take place. Therefore, both micro-othering and micro-care became gestures towards an outside of austerity without participants actually imagining movement towards an outside to austerity. My attempt here is not to judge women for 'failing' to resist austerity in some way. Instead, it is to show anti-austerity imaginaries as ungraspable at the time of my research. In order to get on and get by amidst change, women had no choice, I suggest, than investing in a range of dissonant promises.

Contradictory pulls were held together for women in austerity without easy or obvious resolution. Heating or food? Get a job that does not exist or live life as a shirker? Spend or save? Sanctions or a job that can't be found? Moan about it or have a laugh? Care for a sick parent or leave them to it to pay the bills? Give up that custody battle or represent yourself? Plant seeds and face action from the council for doing so, or leave the flowerbed bare? These

decisions are not dichotomous; there is no clear solution that would resolve the conflict or tension. And these dilemmas are not often commonly faced. Instead, they are distributed variously among a small group of women in a supposedly shared demographic. The questions represent multiple forces pulling at and fragmenting women until all we can do is remain in suspension or 'impasse'.⁵⁷ For Berlant, the impasse refers to the effort it takes just to stay afloat. The impasse is both a time in which something or someone cannot move forward and a 'stretch of time in which one moves around without a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic . . .'.⁵⁸ As for Sandra, in the job centre scene, no outside to these situations can be found by making the 'right' decision and so strategies are developed to continue within and despite these conditions. Therefore, rather than resolution towards a 'brighter future', austerity facilitates a kind of impasse. There is always another round of cuts, and the continued deferral of 'resolution' keeps us waiting for the plot to end.

In the play, we attempted to engage with fracturing forces and dissonant pulls. As shown in the section of script above, Lesley (the group lead) tries and then fails to inform Sandra that the group is going to close. We discover Lesley's investment in a different promise – that somehow things will turn out for the best as she describes a tragi-comic commitment to 'Cosmic Ordering'. This is taken from the popular 2007 'self-help' book written by the UK television personality Noel Edmonds – *Positively Happy: Cosmic Ways to Change Your Life*.⁵⁹ This refrain of displaced hope escalates and repeats in different situations in the play. Lesley fails to confront the issue of closure while she gets on with running the group and discretely closing down its operations. In a relation of 'cruel optimism',⁶⁰ her actions become disconnected from their intended effects as the audience recognise that investment in cosmic ordering will do little to improve the chances for this group. Lesley's behaviour also enables Sandra to invest in her own project – the production of a play – without realising that its performance will be disrupted by closure. Characters' different modes of adapting to change demonstrated their desires and drives to keep going no matter what. However, paradoxically these forms of adaption also at times perpetuated processes of fracturing, as other possibilities were closed down for women.

Harm happens in the play regardless of characters' actions, and so why shouldn't they cope in the best way they can? Instead of closure, or triumphant refusal of closure, the plot reaches a climax when both Sandra and Lesley can no longer invest in their proximate promises. Situations escalate and in doing so reach a tipping point.⁶¹ Still this left us with a problem, which was never quite resolved. Do the characters continue 'getting on and getting by' after closure? Do they resist closure in ways that women in the group did not deem to be realistic? Does this closure become followed by another barrage of cuts, and what happens after that? Perhaps women reach a tipping point and then

feel compelled to act. Perhaps we find a different and more surprising kind of ending. In our failure to address those questions, the audience are left with character's attempts to get on and get by, to continue to see each other despite the closure of the group, to find some kind of resolution, off stage somehow. And what becomes clear from our struggles to develop a coherent plot is the fracturing of objectives and dissonant relations that become held together in austerity. There is no coherent narrative, and there is no shared experience upon which that narrative might be built. Instead, there is increased precarisation, which means exactly the withdrawal of opportunity for women to build a story together.

Conclusion: story

In this process, I have thought about how austerity might become present in our play through engagement with setting and atmosphere – as a phone goes unanswered, as a bucket catches drips and in the claim that now there are new flowers; through character in a dynamic of coercive control as choices are closed down for women, as they are belittled and blamed; and through plot as women hope towards an outside of austerity without finding a road towards that outside. But it is in the relations between those three devices and their excesses that we attempted to make a story – our story – of austerity. This story is not all that can be said of austerity, but it is informed by how austerity impacts on those particular women. The play evokes the dynamism, the care, the love between those women, and it shows their occasional indifference to the austere state despite its violence. However, a key tension resonates throughout our attempts to 'dramatise austerity'. That is, how to make a story about 'something' when that something keeps falling apart? How to make the individuated and individuating effects of austerity resonate beyond the individual? How to capture a sense that in the midst of austerity the women I worked with were pulled in conflicting directions and at times just getting through the everyday became an exhausting process?

Austerity as insidious. It escapes its outsiders as it disrupts women's time, energy and opportunity to invest in other imaginaries. Momentum towards resolution is removed and dissonance – discord – is endured. Austerity closes down spaces for common experience, as the library or the women's group is withdrawn, as unpaid labour is disrupted by demands for paid work, as paid work is made increasingly precarious, as reforms take effect in different places and at different times to counter the already long-faded story that we are all in this together. A dominant narrative produces austerity as a form of momentum towards resolution after the event of financial crisis. There is a coherent sense of movement towards a shared objective. Simultaneously, paradoxically, austerity becomes the undoing of the very things it promises to protect. Austerity rumbles on. Things get worse. Such dissonance resonates with how

women experienced life amidst the cuts and reforms of austerity. There is hope and a cruel promise of a job, of 'less immigration', of a council house, but those promises can hold their own violence, go unfilled or bring no resolution. It is by working closely with a small group of women and engaging their complex and nuanced relations with various cuts and reforms of austerity that we begin to understand its effectiveness as a divisive force. Therefore, if we research only one reform or one effect of austerity, say the bedroom tax, or the food bank, we get a particular sense of what austerity is and does that differs perhaps from how austerity is encountered, in this case by women in their everyday lives. By engaging closely with the intimate experiences of a small group of women over an extended period of time, we could get at how the effects of austerity impacted on them differently and dissonantly so that even in a supposedly shared demographic, women lacked a shared imaginary of this enigmatic austerity. It was because of this absent presence that we did not – could not – quite fully share an anti-austerity imaginary. And harm continues, while often we look the other way.

The restlessness of austerity reform and its entanglement with broader issues and processes, including the demonisation of workless women, creeping privatisation and conditionality, poverty and precarisation, make austerity difficult to grasp. A fictional play became a tangible object through which we could give austerity form. Dramatising austerity enabled us to experiment with and bring together affective, atmospheric and material traces of austerity. We could attempt to capture and evoke its incoherent and elusive qualities. Using drama as a method in this way involved not only the coproduction of story *or* empirics, not only a creative process *or* a method of research, but instead provided techniques for collaborative modes of enquiry that operated between story and empirics, creativity and research. Story in this article and in this process of play-making provided a particular kind of structure that framed how we attuned to and expressed women's experiences of austerity. In the play, story worked to 'engage' audiences, it facilitated emotional 'investment' in character's journeys through austerity and attempted to speak through the singular to something more generic. In this article, story operates in three distinct ways: (1) as a mechanism for organising lives and sense-making in the chaos after financial crisis, framing contemporary austerity as something that enables momentum towards a 'brighter future' while the same 'brighter future' remains in a state of continued deferral; (2) as something that was coproduced with women, happening through the room in which we practised, the weather, drama techniques, women's experiences, audiences' response and so on; (3) as a theoretical insight that perhaps made some sense of why anti-austerity imaginaries were not attached to coherently to by women and that illuminates the dissonance, the discord and the contradictions that constitute austerity. It is by operating with and across these three uses of story that I attempt to evoke

the complex lives of austerity.

Notes

1. Much of that work has been done already, for example, in H.Lorimer's, 'Herding Memories of Humans and Animals', *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space*, 24(4), 2006, pp. 497–518; H.Lorimer and H.Parr 'Excursions – Telling Stories and Journey', *cultural geographies*, 21(4), 2014, pp. 543–47 and, most recently, compellingly in M.Rose, 'A Place for Other Stories: Authorship and Evidence in Experimental Times', *GeoHumanities*, 2(1), 2016, pp. 132–48.
2. See H.Hawkins on 'Creative Geographic Methods: Knowing, Representing, Intervening', *cultural geographies*, 22(2), 2015, pp. 247–68, <[https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/creative-geographic-methods-knowing-representing-intervening\(52f98abf-ba49-46e3-9706-dc94d8217c60\).html](https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/creative-geographic-methods-knowing-representing-intervening(52f98abf-ba49-46e3-9706-dc94d8217c60).html)>; H.Hawkins, *For Creative Geographies: Geography, Visual Arts and the Making of Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2013), <[https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/for-creative-geographies-geography-visual-arts-and-the-making-of-worlds\(893eb6eb-6a8d-4b42-8c3e-da6d0215f01f\).html](https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/for-creative-geographies-geography-visual-arts-and-the-making-of-worlds(893eb6eb-6a8d-4b42-8c3e-da6d0215f01f).html)>; M.Pearson, 'Raindogs Performing the City', *cultural geographies*, 19(1), 2012, pp. 55–69; I.Biggs, 'The Spaces of "Deep Mapping": A Partial Account', *Journal of Arts & Communities*, 2(1), 2011, pp. 5–25, for examples of and reflections on a growing field of multi and inter-disciplinary work between research and creativity that engages human geography.
3. This process involved my joining an existing women's group, where I worked with Donna Tonkinson who facilitated 6 weeks of drama workshops. I then participated at the group for a further 2 years. I used actors to perform the script in development back the group (twice) conducted interviews and group discussion.
4. T.Gore, S.Fothergill, E.Hollywood, C.Lindsay, K.Morgan, R.Powell and S.Upton, *Coalfields and Neighbouring Cities: Economic Regeneration, Labour Markets and Governance* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2007), <<http://www.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/coalfields-neighbouring-cities.pdf>>; R.Crisp, E.Batty, I.Cole and D.Robinson, *Work and Worklessness in Deprived Neighbourhoods: Policy Assumptions and Personal Experiences* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2009), <<http://www.employmentinscotland.com/media/82614/work-worklessness-and-deprived-neighbourhoods.pdf>>; R.Hudson, 'Thatcherism and Its Geographical Legacies: The New Map of Socio-Spatial Inequality in the Divided Kingdom', *The Geographical Journal*, 179, 2013, pp. 377–81, <www.dur.ac.uk/geography/staff/geogst/affhidden/?mode=pdetail&id=345&sid=345&pdetail=87778> on the mapping of employment gaps onto what were industrial strongholds.
5. After I.Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (London: Verso Books, 2015).
6. See Rose, 'A Place for Other Stories' on the capacity of story, p. 2.
7. Rose, 'A Place For Other Stories', p. 6.
8. Rose, 'A Place For Other Stories', p. 3.
9. Rose, 'A Place For Other Stories', p. 4.
10. I am indebted to 'Open Clasp Theatre Company' whose approach to making professional theatre with women inspired this process, <<http://www.openclasp.org.uk>>
11. This involved outlining key events in the life of a character.
12. Here, we drew around the body of a collaborator and then worked on that image to develop a character by exploring what she does, what she thinks and what she feels, what are her desires and her fears.
13. Again see Open Clasp Theatre Company for an example of this model of practice and H.Nicholson, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) for an introduction to the discipline of applied theatre and debates concerning the intersections of research-practice in theatre.
14. A series of specific fiscal policies and a political-economic response to the financial crisis of 2008 that has been implemented with various degrees of intensity in a range of contexts in Western economies. On these differentiated global geographies, see M.Kitson, R.Martin and P.Tyler, 'The Geographies of Austerity', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 4, 2011, pp. 289–302. 18 *cultural geographies*
15. M.Blyth, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
16. S.Hall, D.Massey and M.Rustin, 'After Neoliberalism: Analysing the Present', *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 53, 2013, pp. 8–22; A.Brah, I.Szemen and I.Gedalof, 'Introduction: Feminism and the Politics of Austerity', *The Feminist Review*, 109, 2015, pp. 1–7.
17. D.Wheeler, *Spending Review: Department by Department Cuts Guide*, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-34790102>>
18. The 'bedroom tax' is a term commonly used to refer to 'the removal of the spare room subsidy'. This means that working aged people claiming housing benefit with one spare bedroom have 14 per cent of eligible rent withdrawn and those with two or more spare bedrooms will lose 25 per cent of eligible rent. Same sex children up to the age of 16 have to share a room, and other children up to the age of 10 have

- to share a room. A single person with two spare bedrooms paying £120 a week in rent would have to pay £30 of that rent themselves (Department for Work and Pensions 2013).
19. See, T.Butler, 'A Walk of Art: The Potential of the Sound Walk as Practice in Cultural Geography', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 7(6), 2006, pp. 889–908; 14(5), pp. 275–83; C.DeSilvey, JR.Ryan and S.Bond, '21 stories', *cultural geographies*, 21(4), 2013, pp. 657–72; J-D.Dewsbury, 'Performative, Non-Representational, and Affect-Based Research: Seven Injunctions', In D.Delyser, S.Herbert, S.Aitken, M.Crang and L.McDowell (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography* (London: SAGE, 2010), pp. 321–34; D.Dixon, H.Hawkins and E.Straughan, 'Of Human Birds and Living Rocks: Remaking Aesthetics for Post-Human Worlds', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2(3), 2012, pp. 249–70; A.Enigbokan and M.Patchett, 'Speaking with Specters: Experimental Geographies in Practice', *cultural geographies*, 19(4), 2012, pp. 535–46; K.Foster and H.Lorimer, 'Some Reflections on art-geography as collaboration', *cultural geographies*, 14(3), 2007, pp. 425–32; M.Gallagher, 'Sounding Ruins: Reflections on the Production of an Audio Drift', *cultural geographies*, 22(3), 2015, pp. 467–85; H.Hawkins, 'Turn Your Trash into . . . Rubbish, Art and Politics', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 11(8), 2010, pp. 805–27; H.Hawkins, *For Creative Geographies: Geography, Visual Arts and the Making of Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2013); H.Hawkins, 'Creative Geographic Methods: Knowing, Representing, Intervening', *cultural geographies*, 22(2), 2015, pp. 247–68, <[https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/creative-geographic-methods-knowing-representing-intervening\(52f98abf-ba49-46e3-9706-dc94d8217c60\).html](https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/creative-geographic-methods-knowing-representing-intervening(52f98abf-ba49-46e3-9706-dc94d8217c60).html)>; H.Lorimer, 'Cultural Geography: Non-Representational Conditions and Concerns', *Progress in Human Geography*, 29, 2008, pp. 83–94; P.Simpson, 'So, as You Can See . . .': Some Reflections on the Utility of Video Methodologies in the Study of Embodied Practices', *Area*, 43(3), 2013, pp. 343–52.
 20. The most common theatre practices used in geography have been 'verbatim' to date. This involves the live staging of empirical material gathered using methods such as interviews and focus groups. For example, G.Pratt and C.Johnston, 'Staging Testimony in Nanay', *Geographical Review*, 103(2), 2013, pp. 288–303; M.Richardson, 'Theatre as Safe Space? Performing Intergenerational Narratives with Men of Irish Descent', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 16(6), 2015, pp. 615–33. Additionally, forum theatre has offered an opportunity for audiences to interact with performances and as a method for debate that might lead to action after A.Boal, *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics* (London: Routledge 2005); see G.Pratt and C.Johnston, 'Turning Theatre into Law, and Other Spaces of Politics', *cultural geographies*, 14(1), 2007, pp. 92–113. Furthermore, Johnston and Bajrange have shown the engendering of intimacy and 'the bridge of empathy' made possible through participatory theatre C.Johnston and D.Bajrange, 'Street Theatre as Democratic Politics in Ahmedabad', *Antipode*, 46(2), 2014, pp. 455–76.
 21. Although see D.Fassin on the complex blurring of lines between ethnography and fiction and the tensed possibility that the world's anthropologists, sociologists (and human geographers) study might be depicted more compellingly, accurately and profoundly by novelists or filmmakers than by social scientists. D.Fassin, 'True Life, Real Lives: Revisiting the Boundaries between Ethnography and Fiction', *American Ethnologist*, 41(1), 2014, pp. 40–55, <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/amet.2014.41.issue-1/issuetoc>>
 22. Rose 'A Place for Other Stories', p. 13.
 23. I use 'force' after E.Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1994) to describe the multiple forms of relation that co-constitute always becoming body-subjects (also see R.Colls. 'Feminism, Bodily Difference and Non-Representational Theory', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37(3), 2012, pp. 430–55 in geography).
 24. In UK chancellor George Osborne's 2012 Conference Speech, <<http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/politics/2012/10/george-osbornes-speech-conservative-conference-full-text>>
 25. Again see Fassin, 'True Life, Real Lives'.
 26. Blyth, *Austerity*.
 27. J.Clayton, C.Donovan and J.Merchant, 'Emotions of Austerity: Care and Commitment in Public Service Delivery in the North East of England', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 14, 2015, pp. 24–32; R.Coleman, 'Austerity Futures: Debt, Temporality and (Hopeful) Pessimism as an Austerity Mood', *New Formations*, (87), 2016, pp. 83–101; E.Hitchen, 'Living and Feeling the Austere', *New Formations*, (87), 2016, pp. 102–18.
 28. For example, when John Cridland, director general of the CBI, commented 'We All Know That Household Budgets and National Budgets Are the Same', <<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/aug/24/cbi-boss-criticises-jeremy-corbyn-peoples-qe-plan>>, this repeated what has become common rhetoric in the governing party.
 29. J.Tomlinson, 'The Spirit of '45? Austerity Then and Now', *Renew: A Journal of Social Democracy*, 2016, <<http://www.renewal.org.uk/articles/the-spirit-of-45-austerity-then-and-now>>
 30. See O.Hatherley, *The Ministry of Nostalgia: Consuming Austerity* (London: Verso Books, 2016); R.Brammall, *The Cultural Politics of Austerity: Past and Present in Austere Times* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

31. S.Forkert, 'The New Moralism: Austerity, Silencing and Debt Morality', *Soundings*, 56, 2014, pp. 41–53.
32. A phrase repeated regularly by members of the conservative government including Prime Minister David Cameron; for example, see <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/11320232/The-country-is-on-course-for-a-brighter-future.html>>
33. G.Valentine and C.Harris, 'Strivers vs Skivers: Class Prejudice and the Demonisation of Dependency in Everyday Life', *Geoforum*, 53, 2014, pp. 84–92, <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/00167185/53/supp/C>>; T.Jensen and I.Tyler, 'Benefits Broods: The Cultural and Political Crafting of Welfare Common Sense', *Critical Social Policy*, 35(4), 2015, pp. 470–91.
34. The Labour party broadly failed to challenge the often repeated line that they were fiscally irresponsible (a 'joke' letter stating 'sorry we spent all the money' became a gift to the 'Conservative narrative'), <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1279043/George-Osborne-deliver-emergency-Budget-June-22.html>>; some prominent party members still 'accept' that Labour were fiscally irresponsible, and furthermore, the party did not present a challenge to austerity politics until the election of Jeremy Corbyn as party leader in 2015.
35. The slow and insidious process of fraying and loss of neoliberal promise is described by L.Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
36. L.Adkins, 'What Does Money Do? Feminist Theory in Austere Times', *Feminist Review*, 109, 2015, pp. 31–48.
37. Blyth, *Austerity*.
38. Tomlinson, 'The Spirit of '45?'
39. P.Adey, L.Brayner, D.Masson, P.K.Murphy, P.Simpson and N.Tixier, "'Pour Votre Tranquillité':

Ambiance, Atmosphere, and Surveillance', *Geoforum*, 49, 2013, pp. 299–309.

40. A.Amin and N.Thrift, *Arts of the Political* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 161.
41. D.McCormack, 'Engineering Affective Atmospheres: On the Moving Geographies of the 1897 Andre

Expedition', *cultural geographies*, 15(4), 2008, pp. 413–30.

42. There is a body of work on affective atmospheres in geography including, but not limited to, A.Closs-Stephens, 'The Affective Atmospheres of Nationalism', *cultural geographies*, 23(2), 2016, pp. 181–98; J.Allen, 'Ambient Power: Berlin's Potsdamer Platz and the Seductive Logic of Public Spaces', *Urban Studies*, 43(2), 2006, pp. 441–55; B.Anderson, 'Affective Atmospheres', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2, 2009, pp. 77–81; J.Ash, 'Rethinking Affective Atmospheres: Technology, Perturbation and Space Times of the Non-Human', *Geoforum*, 49, 2013, pp. 20–8; D.Bissell, 'Passenger Mobilities: Affective Atmospheres and the Sociality of Public Transport', *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space*, 28, 2010, pp. 270–89; M.M.Degen and G.Rose, 'The Sensory Experiencing of Urban Design: The Role of Walking and Perceptual Memory', *Urban Studies*, 49(15), 2012, pp. 3271–87; T.Edensor, 'Illuminated Atmospheres: Anticipating and Reproducing the Flow of Affective Experience in Blackpool', *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space*, 30(6), 2012, pp. 1103–22.
43. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are taken from interviews (2013) conducted after the drama-making process, and all names are pseudonyms.
44. From Fieldnotes.
45. From Fieldnotes.
46. Again see Jensen and Tyler, 'Benefits Broods'.
47. E.Stark, *Coercive Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
48. Stark, *Coercive Control*, p. 5.
49. L.Friedli and R.Stearn, 'Positive Affect as Coercive Strategy: Conditionality, Activation and the Role of

Psychology in UK Government Workfare Programmes', *Medical Humanities*, 41(1), 2015, pp. 40–7.

50. The localisation of council tax and the reduction of council tax benefits have created a situation in Gateshead whereby even those on very low incomes, including claimants of 'Income Support' (IS) and 'Jobseeker's Allowance' (JSA), pay a percentage of council tax. Those of working age on the very lowest of incomes (including claimants of JSA and IS) would have previously paid no council tax but now pay at least 8.5 per cent of their standard rate. So for a standard payment of £120 per month, a claimant would

pay £10.20 per month. See Wheeler, *Spending Review*.

51. From Fieldnotes.
52. Here, I draw on narrative conventions in script writing. See D.Edgar, *How Plays Work* (London: Nick

Hern Books, 2009); S.Spencer, *The Playwright's Guide Book* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003).

53. A scene of the play was work-shopped at *Live Theatre* in Newcastle, and later Playwright and Director Neil Armstrong became involved in the development process. Therefore, he was drawing upon his own writing experience and prioritising the play's potential to be dramatically effective when he made comments about the plot.
54. After Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 'The Slow Death' describes extended events whereby harm happens slowly and as it does so goes almost unnoticed.
55. Not least amidst insidious cuts to in-work benefits, <http://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/budgets/Budgets%202015/Summer/Hood_distributonal_analysis.pdf>
56. In 2008, parents with the youngest child aged 12 were moved from IS to JSA; in 2009, those with the youngest child aged 10; in 2010, this changed to those with a youngest child aged 7; and in 2012, this changed to parents with a youngest child aged 5. The amount of money parents receive on JSA is the same as IS, but parents or carers on JSA have to prove that they are actively seeking work or face sanctions. What we see here then is a reform that imposes more conditionality on the receipt of welfare for parents.
57. In Berlant's, *Cruel Optimism*.
58. Berlant's, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 4.
59. N.Edmonds, *Positively Happy: Cosmic Ways to Change Your Life* (London: Vermilion, 2007).
60. In Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
61. And perhaps at this point we come to Coleman's Hopeful Pessimism, in 'Austerity Futures'.