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Dear TINA: Protesting Institutions in Times of Crisis

Aylwyn Walsh and Myrto Tsilimpounidi

When Baldacchino (2009) writes about a tightrope over an

'abyss of necessities' (p.7),

I can feel my wavering self

Treading a line I'm not even sure is there

Faltering at a set of borders

Wondering if a fall into positivist paradigms would be a hard landing

Or whether the presumption that arts-based methods are soft is a fallacy.

Somewhere, towards the other side of the chasm

An audience witnesses this perilous task.

From the speakers, a soundtrack crackles 'Which side are you on?' and, on this

side of the divide, two scholars wear balaclavas to protest the

institutionalisation of knowledge.

Some, it seems, are threatened by feeling.

Some prefer their seats hard and the talk at a distance.

It keeps the territories of the academy, and their defenders, safe.

But the guts, the sweat, the stink of fear, revolt and protest -

These are not just concepts to be measured in cups, like so much flour.

Revolutions are not measured in teaspoons.

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So, instead of serving up findings to be easily consumed,

we pause on the other side, to

Protest

The divide between thinking and action.

This miniature board game replicating nation-building in which domains and paradigms seek mouthpieces.

Norman K. Denzin's (2014a) reference to the liberating project of social justice proposes that critical qualitative inquiry be firmly placed within the critiques of accepted knowledge paradigms. This article is positioned within the authors' experiences of a contemporary moment of ontological uncertainty, precarity and risk and considers the form of performance ethnography as a border-crossing, empowering and ethical interpretive framework. As such, this article offers the example of a dialogue between two disciplinary perspectives (sociology and performance studies) that resulted in performance lectures that were presented in Amsterdam, Athens, Berlin, Brighton, Manchester, Mersin, Leeds and London between 2012 and 2014 under the auspices of Ministry of Untold Stories -a creative collaboration based between Greece and the UK. The opening sections attend to how we articulate the territories in and of crisis that necessitate critical performance ethnography. The second half then works through three indicative examples from *It's a Beautiful Thing, the Destruction of Wor(l)ds* (2012) and *Dear TINA: We are sorry for the inconvenience, but this is a revolution* (2014).ⁱ We propose that if scholarship is to offer resistance to institutional precepts that 'there is no alternative' to the forms and values of research, then there must be a methodological revolution.

In order to work through some of the binaries inherent to our disciplinary frames, we draw on D. Soyini Madison's engagement with reflexivity (2011), in which she proposes that self-

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conscious reflection is necessary in making visible the mechanisms of meaning making,

saying:

The labor of contemplating *how* we are contemplating is not merely an implication of the self or being self-conscious about how the self illuminates the social, but it is an implication of the knowledge systems, paradigms and vocabularies we employ in our contemplations to interpret and speak through the self and the social (2011, p.129).

Thus, in thinking through the challenges set by these two thinkers:

It seems we are still stuck in an old battle: the long argument over knowledge.

We reject battle lines drawn by others

Though we cannot deny the weight of history

We want to break and make.

(Thanks Bhabha)

Not because we are driven by what Pollock (1998) calls romantic assumptions.

Nor because we adopt a firm position that claims performance is

Democratic

Egalitarian

Utopian

But because we seek a form that moves

That shifts thinking

And itself queries assumptions about knowledge.

That puts our bodies into the space.

Maybe from there

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*We can destabilize these ancient bedrocks of colonial, exclusionary reckoning
and bring voice to Spry's (2001) project that disentangles scripts
and places 'I' in the conflict
and turn towards Pelias' (2005) promise
of shaking
the imagination.*

*Maybe, landing there, we will find a place
where arguing about sides is not as important as
being together.*

Articulating positions: Territories of and in crisis

As two scholars working in the UK, but focused on research in Greece, we are positioned in an era characterised by crisis.ⁱⁱ We attempted to navigate the divide between lives as activists, artists and academics, simultaneously trying to be recognised as 'serious', legitimate scholars. We attended many conferences where we became used to colleagues' analysis of how the financial crisis became a crisis of values, beliefs and politics; we paused to talk about the 'refugee crisis' that Europe is forced to acknowledge; and then we took a deep breath to address the humanitarian crisis Southern European urban centres face due to welfare and pension cuts, joblessness and crumbling health systems. To research these topics even while experiencing them is to delve into fraught emotional landscapes.

Within the research field, and on the level of street politics, this is the era of emotions.

Movements and resistant acts are usually remembered from the date (May 68) or the place of gathering (Tahrir Square), but in Southern Europe the common denominator was an emotion: anger and indignation, from the *Indignados* in Spain to the *Aganaktismenoi* in

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Greece. When people experience each crisis on a separate basis the usual response is a retreat to the self and the private space. In this case, as journalist Aditya Chakraborty (2015) demonstrates, debt is socialised and the despair privatised – and this point is valid in many contexts other than the UK. When academics analyse each crisis on a separate basis they tend to withdraw into their specified niches and disciplinary borders. Yet, in moments of awakening, despair becomes anger and indignation against a system that thrives through the production of crises. As leftist philosophers and legal scholars indicate, such privatised despair becomes an *en masse* performance of outrage in which citizens in a range of countries across the globe have gathered to express dismay, frustration and betrayal by those elected to represent them (Badiou, 2012; Douzinas, 2013). There is a politicization of everyday life, in which people come to realise the need for protest, demonstration, and public visibility (Kakogianni & Rancière, 2013). In our work, we are not attempting to examine the effectiveness of these public uprisings, as to analyse everyday life in terms of 'success' or 'failure' is the prevailing logic of the neoliberal discourse. But rather, we seek to understand the ways these events – both large, social protests and everyday micro-level resistances to our individual circumstances – change the modes and methods with which we do research about our social worlds. In short, we are trying to outline the ambiguity (intellectually and emotionally) of our own positions, bisected by competing identities that can often seem contradictory: (Activist/ artist; scholar/ border-crosser; performance/ sociology; science/ art).

What are the fixed understanding and narratives that need to be challenged in order to create a space where new possibilities can be forged? We, early career, female academics from global South and the European periphery respectively, are ourselves the products of crisis and we insist that these new possibilities could and should be unpacked in a collaborative engagement across disciplinary borders. In doing so, we take heed of Holman

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Jones' suggestion that autoethnographers 'view research and writing as socially-just acts; rather than a preoccupation with accuracy, the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better' (2005, p. 764).

In addition, as Denzin (2014a) points out, the challenges of qualitative inquiry reflect the interconnectedness between the global and the local. In this time of crisis, the changing social landscape has been characterised by global sharing through technology networks - a sense of connectedness and solidarity with struggles elsewhere, even while these struggles manifest differently as local and specific. These ongoing demonstrations suggest that the fundamental tenets of democracy are being negotiated: that is, the participation and representation of people in the civic sphere through performance, presence and visibility (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013; Žižek, 2012). By bringing our own bodies, and those of our audiences, into the frame of reference, we draw attention to the violent systems that draw people into street protests. But what this performance framing also does is to highlight the differences between people's experiences, rather than attempting to suggest a heterogeneous experience of precarity. As such, we consider that there is also an epistemological issue that is raised – in which previously certain terrains of academic discourses and disciplines need to be re-examined in light of shifting social concerns. For us, it is important to engage in qualitative research that offers polyvalent, multi-method perspectives on complex matters rather than rely on methodologies that identify problems and offer solutions. In his earlier proposal for an engaged, politically relevant academy, that seems more prevalent now than ever, Denzin argues that what is needed is a qualitative method that crosses disciplines fruitfully:

Never have we had a greater need for a militant utopianism to help us
imagine a world free of conflict, terror and death. We need an

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oppositional, performative social science. Performance disciplines that will enable us to create oppositional utopian spaces, discourses, and experiences within our public institutions (2003, pp. 7-8).

Sociologist Les Back (2012) argues there is always some kind of correlation between portrayal and betrayal, by which he suggests that the fluidity and complexity of the real world is very difficult to be captured in singular representations. This is not, of course, a claim to abandon analysis and the representation of real life but rather to re-examine our modes of writing and representing. The role of research then, should not be to quantify social change, and not to attempt to predict 'solutions' – which mirrors the managerial and political approaches that have been applied and failed (in the context of Greece in particular) in recent years. For us, the managerial paradigm was no longer appropriate, and so we claim that we need to move from the realm of academicians to a hybrid activist/academic/artist response.

Towards critical performance ethnography

The questions arising were how could we make academic labour relevant to the protesting outraged public? What is the delicate balance between an academic and an active participant in the uprisings? How could we represent the stories of occupation and resistance? How could our critical approach avoid institutionalisation? In both projects we attempted to resist discursive borders of sociology and performance by occupying both. In the milieu of crisis and extreme austerity, categories of meaning become precarious and thus the only productive approach is an analysis neither *for* nor *of*, but *from within* these contested identities. Such approaches challenge how knowledge is produced, as a powerful decentralisation of the discourse that connects academic labour with the politics of emotions.

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In her exegesis on critical methods relating to ethnography, Madison says that ‘advocacy and ethics require that the “I” of my personal responsibility [needs to] be explicitly stated in order to address what is for me a fundamental question, “What do I do now?”’ (2012, p. 97). Elsewhere, she refers to the necessity for reflexivity:

When reflexivity is understood as constitutive of the performative-I, not only are we asserting that the labor of reflexivity is a demand for transparent accountability, skilled artistry, and radical politics from the researcher but also can we more confidently resist the slings and arrows of positivism’s obsession with evidence (Madison, 2011, p. 130).

This critical exchange between sociology and performance studies defies the regimes of institutionalised academic value and impact statements. Even in ostensibly interdisciplinary projects, the arts can appear to be in service to the serious sociological investigations – an afterthought, or merely a rather beautiful means of disseminating findings. Our attempts to avoid this disciplinary snobbery led us to borrow from critical ethnography and performance ethnography methodologies. In these approaches, the use of ‘subjective’ documentation strategies resulting in innovative dissemination is well rehearsed (Alexander, 2005; Bochner, 2013; Conquergood, 1991; Denzin, 2003; Madison, 2012; Pelias, 2005; 2007; Spry, 2001). Rather than remain distinct in our hermetically sealed disciplinary paradigms, the process sought to balance form with content as we explored the possibilities of cross-disciplinary exchange.

The examples we highlight in this article began as a simple methodological experiment in which both authors attempted to experiment in the ‘field’ of the other (Bourdieu, 1990). This required each of us to adopt new dispositions or ‘habitus’ that would allow the dialogue to take place. For example, the performance methodologies we used rely on

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spontaneous, playful, irreverent and improvisational responses to materials from Athens during crisis (*It's a Beautiful Thing*) and institutions of both higher education and corrections (*Dear TINA*). This experimental phase gave rise to poems, letters and monologues that offered a sense of positioning and an embodiment of the concerns we had found. From a sociological perspective, this means of coding, categorising, and then writing the materials 'up' exposed new registers. That is, we were not limited to 'representing' data in forms that could be understood as managerial, objective and accurate (following Denzin, 2013, who called for the 'death of data'). Rather, we encouraged each other to write from the subjective, frustrated, politically charged 'I' (Pollock, 1998; Spry, 2001). By giving permission to ourselves to engage with Madison's 'politics of possibility' (2010), we ensured two distinct registers between sections that were academically sourced and sections that were entirely subjective and unashamed of railing against the ways in which resistance and attempts at revolution were being brandished in data sets in academic conferences.

Often, as we have highlighted above, the kinds of knowledge privileged by critical inquiry predicate an 'answer'. Instead, this collaboration allowed us to ask questions, and its affective, instinctual and embodied subjective register became a provocation to all of its witnesses. Not 'what answers does this research provide to this problem?' but 'what questions does it ask that allow me to consider what I may do now?' (*vide* Madison, 2012, p. 97). This shift from the encounter with research outcomes is modelled on the work of performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood. By rethinking the 'world as text' to the 'world as performance', Conquergood suggests that new questions arise. He asks researchers to engage with performance and cultural process by considering what the 'consequences of thinking about culture as a verb instead of a noun, process instead of product' might be (1991: 190). In light of this, the performance lectures – primarily delivered in academic contexts - address the cultural milieu as processual, fluid and

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emergent. Instead of replicating the text of the performance lecture here, we are attempting to think through the epistemological benefits of methodological border-crossing as necessary in the era of crisis precisely because of the locatedness and the subjective, performative-I that is so compellingly argued by Tami Spry (2001).

Denzin's vision for a performative ethnography that rejects custodial, fetishist and paternalistic approaches (2003: x) provides a valuable starting point for introducing the methodologies used by Ministry of Untold Stories. The two examples of performance ethnography we draw on here emerge out of the collaboration of Ministry of Untold Stories (2010 – 2015). The intention, with the initial piece of work (*It's a Beautiful Thing, the Destruction of Wor(l)ds*, first presented at the Berlin Biennale, 2012), was to investigate how our scholarly activities could reflect activist identities and the affect of experiencing social change in the Greek crisis. It was particularly concerned with up-ending the hegemonic representations of Greece as victimised by crisis, and as such was explicit about its socio-political goals (Shoemaker, 2013). By developing a pastiche, collage-style of different written modes, the form attempts to disrupt 'objectivity, hegemonic discourses and imperialist modes of representation' and brings into being 'collective, accessible, critical public forums (third spaces)' (Shoemaker, 2013, p. 524). This promissory sense of the ways performance can 'create and enact moral meaning' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5) offers a powerful justification for form and content to be radical in its openness to dialogue and negotiation. These notions are also explored in Back and Puwar's (2012) call for live methods.

The second collaborative work (*Dear TINA*) that we deploy here in order to argue for the place of hope and the critical importance of imagination draws on Denzin's assertion that:

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critical imagination is radically democratic, pedagogical, and interventionist.

This imagination dialogically inserts itself into the world, provoking conflict,

curiosity, criticism and reflection (2014, p.82).

This performance lecture developed several monologues that explicitly position both of us in relation to neoliberalism and its manifestations in two institutional paradigms: prisons and universities. In *Dear TINA: we're sorry for the inconvenience, but this is a revolution* (2014), we were especially concerned about how our understanding of wider sociological or philosophical concerns reacted when expressed through deeply personal narrative writing. We hoped to write through and about the institutions in which we work and their effects on our ways of knowing. We were keen to develop a form that, as communications scholar Arthur Bochner articulates, 'acknowledges contingency, finitude, embeddedness in storied being, encounters with Otherness, and appraisal of ethical and moral commitments, and a desire to keep the conversation going' (2013, p. 53).

The material, in both examples, provides a sense of how our own personal experiences of crisis, protest and resistance to institutionalisation relate to wider concerns. In this, as performance scholar Bryant K. Alexander posits

the personal narrative is always a reflection on and excavation of the cultural contexts that give rise to experience. In this sense, personal narratives move from what some might presume to be an insular engagement of personal reflection, to a complex process that implicates the performative nature of cultural identity. (2005, p. 424).

With the methodological challenges as a basis, we worked on an experimental writing project that incorporated both of our voices, informed by figures that changed to reflect the changing realities of economic and social decline. We staged the first piece as participatory

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in order to situate people as witnesses. We attempted to replicate an encounter with the streets and squares of Athens in a time of crisis (though of course, audiences could resist participation). The description of the materials is interpreted through selected reflections gathered from audience members (Ministry of Untold Stories, 2012) as well as from our own critical conversations about the collaboration.

These autoethnographic exchanges become vital interpretive tools for analysing three inter-related modalities: **participation as performing complicity & solidarity, performing the polis, and performing in and against the institution**. In the first instance, it is necessary to begin with a description of the performance-lecture, leading into an engagement with these three analytic modalities. The next section introduces three performance moments that explicitly engaged personal, embodied responses. We do not attempt to recreate the whole narrative, but rather, offer these extracts as particular, storied, experiential examples of a nation and institutions in crisis. These moments are then considered in relation to the wider argument about methodological invigoration in times of uncertainty.

Ministry of Untold Stories: *It's a Beautiful Thing, the Destruction of Wor(l)ds*ⁱⁱⁱ and *Dear TINA*

It's a Beautiful Thing begins with a soundtrack playing as the audience (for both academic audiences and arts audiences) enters the space, that includes a recording of a 1930s mining protest song from the US 'Which Side are You On?', overlaid with voices of people assembled in Athens' Parliament Square (Syntagma). As people gather and take their seats, the two presenters disperse amongst them, handing out statements written on oversize currency facsimiles, along with a gas mask or some protective cream. Once the performance lecture is about to begin, the presenters return: one to the podium, as if preparing for an 'ordinary' scientific paper presentation, the other to a nearby seat.

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Performing Complicity and Solidarity: Gas Masks and An Invitation to Protest in the Square

Myrto: Somewhere during the process of writing and collaborating, I became less apologetic about being positioned in paradigms that are more accustomed to critical theory than experiences. I began to sense there was potential for the playfulness we proposed to do something more than what I could do with words. But then you suggested audience participation, and I grew wary.

Aylwyn: Participation feels like a dirty word. In theatre, as in politics, it is regarded with suspicion. There is an assumption that participation is inherently democratic. On the contrary, it can often feel like coercion and result in intense anxiety for audiences – particularly when the setting is an otherwise ‘standard’ academic conference that is predicated on mostly passive engagement with speakers. Nevertheless, we tried to challenge ourselves to find a form of participation from our audiences that was not so much about demanding actions, but reactions. In this moment, what was important was that individuals were invited to take up an offer that meant that being together in the space was slightly different for each person – and refusals to participate of course also demonstrated a valuable response to the material.

(Some of our audience members are asked to participate by putting on gas masks, while others are given cream against teargas burns).

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Myrto: This is a collective mobilization in which people are invited to participate in a street protest. The invitation is rather celebratory and accompanied by slogans and descriptions of some of the innovative resistance techniques of Athenian protesters. At least half the audience observes a dramatic description of protest actions while wearing masks. These are not traditional gas masks but rather surgical masks.

Aylwyn (interrupting): We had to make a logistical choice, because travelling across borders with multiple gas masks in suitcases could be considered an incitement to terrorism. Especially as I am a non-European alien.

Myrto: We also wanted to mark out visually what a threat of contagion might look like – in which a section of the populace wears masks to protect against the threat of disease. The imagery reflects the rhetoric of crisis as contagion that must be quarantined and furthermore, that the austerity measures are understood as a bitter pill to be swallowed.

The action suggests several things: firstly, we project onto their own 'innocent' bodies the (in our view) ridiculous criminalisation of people in protests that wear gas masks. This is because we hope the audience members with gas masks feel the injustice and impunity of the juridical system that perpetrates these kinds of arrests on ordinary people. This is also an embodied exposure to the rituals of preparation for a street protest unsettling the logocentric discourse of academic presentations. The use of the mask in a protest provides protection from both teargas but also it defends the need for anonymity. The dissemination of the gas masks in *It's a Beautiful Thing* is not a claim of the emancipation of the anonymous spectator but rather a call for the realization of the bodily dangers a protester

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faces in the era of intensified police brutality. The Zapatistas, for example, argue that by hiding their faces behind masks, individual protesters become a symbol of the wider oppressed minorities and marginal identities.

Imagined audience member: (wearing a 'gas mask') What struck me about your gas mask and Maalox section was how it was staged to find a way to bring all the bodies in the room into some sort of ethical relation to the subject matter. We each either have a mask, cream, or none of these. In every case, we are faced with a corresponding 'charge' or dilemma.

I am wearing a gas mask. My colleague is not. I am told I will be arrested for 'subversive civil disobedience'. He is told that he gets away but must go home and publicize arrests. I feel stressed. I can't breathe.

Aylwyn (to the audience): Without requiring any decision-making or agency from the audience in any other way, you are implicated in these positions. The practicalities of having you wearing gas masks for more than 5 minutes was a conscious choice on our behalf, because we did not want to exoticize the rituals and revolutionary energy of 'taking a tour' through the streets and squares of Athens. We did not want you to consume a spectacle of revolution while seated in a protected venue thousands of miles away, but rather, to feel temporarily the shortness of breath and the difficulty of perspective behind the gas mask.

Imagined audience member: It worked. I felt complicit.

Performing complicity and solidarity shifts the relationship between the spectators and the

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presentation by framing the experience as mutual. The admittedly still passive ‘casting’ of the spectators into ‘roles’ does not go as far as the revolutionary theatre of the oppressed model of Augusto Boal (2000) that encourages active ‘rehearsal for real life’. Nevertheless, in academic spaces still so often characterised by competitiveness, measurement and value, the development of a common experience that relies on affective being together does something to propose different ways of relating to materials that might otherwise seem distant. This performance moment offers an interpretive framework by problematising the audience’s own relationship with the embodied sensations of state violence. Theatre scholar Jill Dolan says that

[p]erformance of the moment also creates community, images, and energy for protestors to rally around, take pride and pleasure in; it focuses anger, as well as political momentum and desire. Performance, in its liveness, in the commitment of bodies we bring to it, challenges [...] alienation (2001, p. 13).

Performing the *Polis*: Becoming Athens

Aylwyn (*addressing Myrto*):

I staged your body

As the nation

Your accent, your self

Standing in for Greece/ facing the charge of:

‘Tenacious non-compliance;

Fraternizing with international bankers;

Clientelism;

Unrepentant laziness;

Handing out early pensions;

Tax-evasion;

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Sun-baked decadence'. (Walsh & Tsilimpounidi, 2014, p. 146).

Although it caused some consternation amongst audiences, there was an immediacy and urgency that this kind of embodied claim could make. That is, it positioned the city anthropomorphically as accused, victimised and under threat. This enabled audiences to enter into debate about the perceived fairness of such victimisation of a city (and her inhabitants). This staging choice recalls theatre scholar Janelle Reinelt's desire for a radical democratic theatre in which the shared space of a performance creates 'a place of democratic struggle where antagonisms are aired and considered, and where the voluntary citizenry, the audience, deliberates on matters of state in an aesthetic mode' (1998, p. 289).

Performing (against) the institution: 'Fucking Liberty'

Dear TINA: We're sorry for the inconvenience, but this is a revolution^{iv} is a performance lecture that extended our existing collaborative autoethnographic methodology by considering neoliberalism and its effects and impacts within institutional workplaces. Aylwyn has worked as a creative artist in prisons for over 10 years in South Africa and the UK and Myrto reflects on her first full time academic position in Higher Education in the UK. This performance poem is delivered in the style of spoken word poetry.

Aylwyn:

I resigned from working as an artist in prisons in the UK too late:

Why would I work there in the first place? It's complex. But after five years of doing my time, I resigned from the zero hours contract:

After refusing to wear a uniform to give prisoners the illusion that there were more trained officers safeguarding the place;

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After my bag of laundry was investigated by the duty officer holding up my underclothes for all to see;

After I was sexually harassed by my line manager in the education department;

After I was stopped from staging a charity music event because officers did not want prisoners to have access to live music if they could not listen to the radio;

After I was accused of being an industrial spy for sitting in on a meeting of wing representatives discussing the portion size of fish and chips. That's prison.

Where the length of a cod is debated more hotly than the length of sentences.

After I had battled to get prisoners to film studies because they needed to be in warehouses, Packing dog biscuits for the prison to reach its targets for the month;

After I had filled classes with men who were mad or bad, frequently both;

After I had seen within the institutions the clustering of class and poverty, and lack of education and how there was an internalisation of accumulation as the measure of 'success' in life; and how this gross obsession with materialism was deeply related to criminality;

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After listening to countless repetitive arguments about 'the system', with men who were obsessed with Playstation, the latest films, fast cars and lots of money;

After I recycled boxes to use as props only to realise they were labeled 'dummy security cameras' (I had internalised the spectacle of surveillance);

After every piece of research I was asked to do was about proving why prison works (simply disguised as a justification for specific arts interventions);

After I felt every count of every body was adding profit to the prison management, the same big conglomerate that transports us on the DLR, that oversees the sexual abuse of immigrant detainees in Yarl's Wood and in Australian centres, the company that overcharged government for electronic tags to monitor ex-prisoners already dead, and the same company that scuppered the Olympic Games security contract.

I left prison. But prison didn't leave me.

I still have dreams of leaving a gate unlocked or forgetting my mobile phone in my bag.

One functionally illiterate lad was always first to volunteer for drama. His catchphrase was 'fucking liberty'.

Indeed.

It's complex, liberty, in the prison industrial complex.

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In prisons that are paid to warehouse cons put to work jobs getting a pound a shift; that are staffed by under-educated people in de-industrialised towns; where the prison is the only viable employer.

The average cost of a UK prison place per annum is over £40,000.

More than what I earn in Higher Education.

There are more than 86000 people in prisons in England and Wales, and the last 15 years has seen more than 3000 new imprisonable offences.

It takes time to realise that the prison service mission to protect is a sales pitch: the only worry is how the public actually buy the message?

But it's a clever game: in which taxes fund institutions that promulgate fear, not safety. In which the distinction between inside and outside is no longer so clear. In which freedoms are misunderstood as material desires, rather than equality, rights and other personal and social liberties.

Writing against an institution that has granted access highlights the ambiguous positionality of prison educators. Being able to develop an autoethnographic response in performance offered the opportunity to understand how the institution becomes an embodied practice of removing agency, not only from prisoners. The growing body of prison ethnographies (Drake et al, 2015; Jefferson, 2015; Rhodes, 2013; Rowe, 2014; Waldram, 2015) develop awareness of the complexities of researcher experiences and the discourses of crime, justice and punishment that have enabled their presence.

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By contrast, Myrto's monologue in the form of a letter to various gatekeepers of academic institutions seeks to highlight the issues of the growing neoliberalisation of higher education. She reflects concerns put forward by Terry Eagleton (2010), who pronounced the death of the university as centre of critique. According to Eagleton, academia in the UK is a servant to the status quo and does not challenge it in the name of justice, tradition, imagination, human welfare, the free play of the mind or alternative visions of the future. Universities have traditionally being described as ivory towers, but even within the established distance between them and the social world they were seeking to understand, they maintained some ability to reflect on social problems even from a distance and a position of authority. Eagleton suggests that education should be responsive to the needs of society, but this is not the same as regarding yourself as a service station for 'neocapitalism'. Eagleton's conclusion echoes Bourdieu's main argumentation that universities and advanced capitalism are fundamentally incompatible.

The letter draws on a satirical tone that stages resistance to the kinds of metrics and impossible expectations of academic labour (Giroux, 2015b; 2016). When staged in conferences, it embodies the disobedient position of scholar/ activists whose endeavours are not readily accounted for in existing paradigms.

Aylwyn:

We didn't want to position ourselves as having answers.

Nor did we want to just mouth the questions.

And so we developed a bit of fighting talk: a series of testy positions in which

we could raise some of our experiences, & hope for some points of debate/

passion/ fury/ recognition/ critique/ despair/ rupture.

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In order to lay TINA to rest, a eulogy to the constraints and complaints of the ivory tower.

(Myrto addresses the audience with Aylwyn wearing a balaclava)

Myrto:

Dear REF committee^v,

I'm sorry for the inconvenience that demonstrating the impact factor of my research seems to be so difficult for you.

Dear colleagues,

I'm sorry for the disciplinary trouble I give you when trying to fit my work into a unit of assessment.

Dear students,

I'm sorry for having to administer random assessments that bear no relevance to the moments of communal learning we shared in class.

Dear job search committees,

I'm sorry for the inconvenience I pose as an applicant interested in radical research. I've tried to tone down my politics to fit in with your course descriptions, but whitewashing doesn't suit me.

Dear peer reviewers & journal editors,

I am sorry I never cited your own article from 1984.

I am sorry I have unruly ideas.

I am sorry that my foreign accent is offensive to you.

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I apologise for writing via outlandish metaphors.

I regret that my playing with language creates dense, frustrating reading.

In future, I will avoid making demands on all 3 potential readers of your over-inflated journal.

Dear academic self,

I am sorry I have neglected the body in pursuit of all this.

It wasn't worth it.

Dear TINA, we are sorry for the inconvenience but this is a revolution.

These extracts from letters specify the kind of managerial metrics that shape the kinds of research academics are encouraged to do.^{vi} Our call for a revolution in this piece is not located in a particular nation state, nor in a specific political context, but is a call for rethinking how social conditions and intersecting oppressions render us all somehow subject to a state of emergency. The shift between poetic monologues confessing failure in carceral institutions and the sardonic letter to different agents in higher education explicitly sets up the link between how such institutions position contingent workers. We are not suggesting that a methodological shift will unseat such oppressions, but that, in the face of crisis, it is necessary to retaliate creatively.

Reflecting on crisis, institutions and the need for border-crossing methodologies

These performance moments from *It's a Beautiful Thing*, and *Dear TINA* are explored here in relation to the function they played in shifting the audience's attention from the facts, or knowledge claims about crisis and political turmoil in Greece, as well as the radical precarity of freelance arts worker in prisons and an academic with a short term contract, to the

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ontological experience of being alongside the action. Within the academy, both performance lectures have been presented in several conference settings that are ostensibly interdisciplinary. Yet, almost uniformly, audiences have expressed surprise at the sensations evoked through the methodology. We believe this points towards the potential for the innovative explorations of ethnographic performance methods. Foundational to these methods are Conquergood's questions: 'what kinds of knowledge are privileged or displaced when performed experience becomes a way of knowing, a method of critical inquiry, a mode of understanding?' (1991, p. 191). The audience's responses to the specific three moments in the performance lectures are instructive in their pointing towards the impact of feeling, knowing and doing within the frame of an ordinarily structured academic conference mode. Instead of sitting (perhaps passively, perhaps engaged), listening to expert opinions based on meticulous data collection; audiences in several locations responded to the effects and affects of the work. Pelias' view is instructive here. 'Standing in':

may be viewed as an act of mimesis (faking), poiesis (making), or kinesis (breaking and remaking). Whether performers see themselves as participating in order to replicate, construct, or provide alternatives to current constructions, their task remains constant: They are to perform actions that are available for others and themselves to read. And, in the doing, they come to know how embodiment reifies, insinuates, destabilizes, interrogates, and alters their own and others' ways of seeing the world. (2007, p. 187).

The three performance moments have set up Ministry of Untold Stories' methodology as a border-crossing dialogue that seeks to contribute to an understanding of performance ethnography. Following performance theorist Tavia Nyong'o (2012), we are concerned with

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the potential for action that emerges through a reflexive performance – one in which matters of time, precarity, the body and affect are called into being in a moment of mutual deliberation. What we aspire to is a model of collaborative research praxis that functions in the same way that the research concerns do: to claim spaces, to challenge fixed assumptions about ownership, epistemological hierarchies and value; and to challenge what institutions do to our knowledge claims. We hope that performing sociology will provide a means of approaching some of the untold stories raised in research in and of times of crisis, especially since as radical leftist perspectives have it, these are times in which knowledge, history and politics are being reborn (Badiou, 2012). If scholarship is to offer resistance to TINA, then there must be a methodological revolution. Ultimately, we believe that research on specific social milieus in crisis can have important manifestations since methodologies of embodied engagement require academic and non-academic audiences to reflect on their own understandings of social change.

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ⁱ The title *Dear TINA* refers to two oppositional political movements. 'TINA' references the well-rehearsed phrase uttered by Margaret Thatcher: 'there is no alternative' that underpinned many of the Conservative Party's neoliberal policies. The second part of the title references Subcomandante Marcos (2002) and the Zapatistas. In this article we focus on neoliberalism's institutions, while in the performance, our use of balaclavas mimics the Zapatista community's uniform.

ⁱⁱ Note that Myrto was completing a post-doctoral position at the University of East London. She has since left the UK.

ⁱⁱⁱ The title of the work paraphrases a line in George Orwell's *1984*, in which Big Brother's totalitarianism seeks to erase extraneous words from the dictionary.

^{iv} See Fisher's account of capitalist realism, relating to the inevitability of realist aesthetics under neoliberalism (2009).

^{vi} The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is intended to be a national metric of the quality of research outputs, the wider impact of research and the vitality of the research environment. This correlates to university funding, and is intended to rank research in the spirit of accountability as a result of public funding. The 'Unit of Assessment' referred to in the next line relates to how research is aligned with specific disciplines for assessment against the REF. For a more critical perspective in relation to the university in ruins, see Alan Read et al (2015).