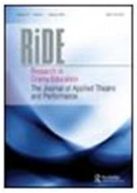

Debt, the migrant, and the refugee: Lampedusa on stage

Journal:	*Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*
Manuscript ID	CRDE-2017-0048.R2
Manuscript Type:	Themed Issue Paper
Keywords:	debt, debtor, refugee, hope, austerity

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Abstract

The article discusses Anders Lustgarten's play, Lampedusa. The play is ostensibly about refugees and the Mediterranean crossing, as well as addressing EU migration, debt, and austerity. The article develops the idea of the debtor in neo-liberal economics suggesting that the refugee is required to become a debtor on settlement. While Lustgarten's representation of refugees and migrants is not fully realised in that they are not enabled agents in the script or in performance, the article concludes that while the play is thus flawed, its characters' search for moral restitution create a thoughtful insight into British society and grounds for hope.

Keywords

Debt, debtor, refugee, hope, austerity

Debt, Reciprocity, and the Sea

The starting point for this paper was the play *Lampedusa* (Lustgarten, 2015), which I saw performed at the Unity Theatre, Liverpool in September 2015. My attention was caught by the advertising material – an image of refugees in a boat on (apparently) the Mediterranean.[ii] Once in the theatre the audience encountered a poised juxtaposition of two monologues. The speaking characters were an Asian-British woman, Denise (played by Louise Mae-Newberry, Unity, Liverpool and Soho) and an Italian islander, Stefano (played by Steven Elder, Unity, and Ferdy Roberts, Soho). They are observers and players at the a/moral epicentres of contemporary Europe but, crucially for this discussion, neither are refugees. Other named characters are not onstage but rather alluded to in the monologues. Denise's mother and clients (she is a debt collector) and Stefano's wife, workmates and an asylum seeker he encounters onshore (he is a fisherman turned coastguard) define Denise and Stefano's depressed localities and difficult life experiences, whilst the migrants whom they meet exemplify new possibilities of reciprocity and optimism. As this opposition suggests, the narratives of mutual engagement are represented to us in the voices of the two speaking protagonists, not those of the Portugal-to-Britain EU migrants (Carolina and her child) nor the Mali-to-Italy refugees (Modibo and Aminata[iii]) with whom Denise and Stefano build their respective friendships. The playwright thus offers the audience a view of invisible characters formed and refracted through the needs of the speaking characters. In a sense, therefore, *Lampedusa* is not about refugees and migrants, but rather about an idea of what refugees and migrants may be or could do to help others achieve what we might see as inner peace, or alternatively, political mobility and freedom. I would like to explore whether this represents a major flaw in the play or whether it in fact acknowledges the imaginary space into which new arrivals are captured at the behest of previous settlers – whether or not that imaginary is of positive or negative cast. Certainly, in *Lampedusa* there is a raw imbalance between those who speak and those who are conjured by the speech. Carolina, Modibo and Aminata are presented as exceptionally good human beings whose friendship offers a moral way forward to Stefano and Denise, but we really know nothing more about them. In their physical and vocal absence they are rendered emotionally and intellectually indistinct. Rather, the play is concerned to clarify the emotional precarity of two Europeans – the Italian man and the British woman - in situ and to explore how they might grow stronger through a strategy of achieving reciprocity through an act of recognition, and as the outcome of an acceptance of another's (the Other's) moral strength. In sum, the play proffers a new configuration of ethno-class relations *across* borders and *despite* the configurations of social deficit in which the characters are severally trapped.

While the relationships discussed in the play focus on how unexpected reciprocity may be born of sympathy for others (generally the sympathetic view of the British woman and Italian man taken by refugees and a recent migrant), that reciprocity is mainly valuable because it contests the notion of indebted wo/man as the default (a)moral position in contemporary neoliberal Britain. This reading of the play is not only informed by the text's many references to debt, and to an understanding of debt as central to the maintenance of an unequal world order, but to the growing awareness in political philosophy that the bad habits of the ancient world are still with us along with the bald cruelties they allow. The institution of debt as a tool to manage intra-human power was crucial to early ideas of personhood. It allowed violence against the person in order to claim ownership of things held and of persons considered as slaves (and therefore non-persons). Once personhood is thus removed, more violence follows. As Roberto Esposito puts it in his discussion of debt, personhood and slavery, and in relation to the current theme,

> Between a slave lashed to death in the provinces of the Roman Empire, in the Alabama of the nineteenth century, or today off the coast of Lampedusa, the most appalling event so far is the most recent one (2015, 33).

I suggest that not only does the concept of governance by debt offer a valid way of connecting Denise's story to Stefano's but that Lustgarten's writing has intuited – even if not fully explored - that if the debtor is the governed (wo)man in a neo-liberal economy, then the refugee's (and migrant's) existence is also necessarily organised - practically and morally – around the subjectivity afforded and demanded by debt (Toruño, 2010, 148). Esposito's longer argument, that the human body is neither person nor thing and is therefore a meta-concept through which we might avoid our own logic of enslavement, is reflected here in a romantic wish for human reciprocity to overwhelm power differentials and the logic of capital.

Practically, a modern refugee or migrant must spend savings in order to travel, she must in many extreme cases (and refugee and migrant experience is by definition extreme) pay for the future up-front by taking out a debt against her own future, the risk to her own and her/his children's lives being a down-payment on survival. Furthermore, on arrival – or indeed on multiple arrivals - the refugee is also expected to pay back for her 'rescue' in money and gratitude to the people and place of settlement and transition. As Toruño puts it in a critique of Stoll's analysis of debt as a pull factor of American migration into the United States rather than a forced condition that supports the neo-liberal world order:

> The pattern of debt and labor migration seems to have created the following cycle of exploitation: The Ixil take out small loans to finance their migration to the United States; assuming a growing U.S. economy (as it was until December 2007) the Ixil find employment (ignoring for the moment the conditions of that employment: low wages, abuse, and racism), pay off the debt, and begin remitting a portion of their wages back home. Their cheap labor allows U.S. capitalists to extract surplus income, a portion of which is, in turn, fed to financial markets seeking returns around the globe, including perhaps Guatemala … (151).

Some migration schemes targeted at refugees (such as in Canada) are explicitly organised around loans and repayment (CACI, 2015, 40; *CBC News* 2015)[iv] while less transparent versions of indebtedness are played out elsewhere through short-term visa programmes. Five year visas (both of which are in use in arrival countries Australia and Britain), create instability for the individual and families, while even shorter visas make it hard for men and women to find permanent employment. An additional problem is the impact of mobility and employment on qualifications, which tend to need local validation. However, fees for validation courses are charged at international rates for some types of discretionary visa holder, and these fees are punitively high.[v] I cannot list all the various ways in which local regulations might inhibit access to future success. But, one can infer from these examples that debt is about opportunity deficit as well as financial insecurity. Debt is a condition whereby the individual is on the back foot, never quite able to make the decisions or to claim the opportunities that the non-indebted enjoy. The Iranian-American author Dina Nayeri has for example explained and rebuked the damage caused by an expectation of endless gratitude (2017). Australian residents and visa holders have commented at their frustration of having to constantly re-articulate a personal narrative in order to find acceptance amongst other members of the public.[vi] Meanwhile cultural critics Wise and Chapman made the point some while ago that the sensory losses associated with migration already destabilise the migrant subject (2005: 1-3).[vii] A migrant who is also a refugee, an individual and group member who is already likely to be traumatised by the circumstances of flight, has even greater need to be accepted 'whole' and without commissioning debt to the new society. And when that debt is premised on the staking of life itself, then it is neither reasonable nor repayable. Indeed, if we take up Esposito's claim on the body as a way beyond power and servitude, personhood and things (120-121), then such a debt cannot be a debt at all.

Lampedusa begins with a spotlight on Stefano, standing with a cigarette in hand, looking out to sea from his island, Lampedusa, and musing on where his world began:

> These were the trading routes of the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians, the Ottomans and the Byzantines. If you look carefully, my grandfather used to say, you can still make out the wakes of their ships (3).

Stefano is an unemployed fisherman turned fisher of men, collector of migrants, the living and the drowned.[viii] His family have fished in the Mediterranean for generations, but the seas have emptied of fish (at least according to Stefano in the play), and the fish that remain are suspected of eating the dead (this is anecdotal advice according to contacts living in the region), or have been emptied due to mismanagement and international trawlers. Whatever the truth of the fish stocks, Stefano's living has disappeared. He has been unemployed as a fisherman for three years, and faces a lifetime of debt if he cannot find employment. He has therefore turned his maritime skills to search and rescue, and retrieval.

> The job no-one else will take (7).

Stefano's new 'job' assumes that he has been employed through the Italian 'Mare Nostrum' (Our Sea) initiative, set up in late 2013 after a particularly appalling shipwreck, to manage the rescue of refugees on unsafe boats, and the retrieval of bodies of those who had perished (Albahari, 2016, 277-278). Mare Nostrum was quickly superseded by collective European Union procedures, and various collaborations with the Libyan government (Spruce, 2013, 40; Albahari, 283).[ix] Stefano embodies both the historical romance of the Mediterranean sea-farer, and the man amongst men who must pick up the pieces of the 21st century in the wake of new, ironically less seaworthy ships, new wars that set people to sea in the first place, and new political alliances across the Mediterranean. Stefano dreads especially the boatloads of women and children who will be abandoned mid-voyage by smugglers who tell them that there is one last payment owing, and leave them to float, possibly to be rescued, but also possibly to drown. Their cynicism brings new literalism to the phrase, drowning in debt. While Stefano's debt is personal and contingent on the perceived negative impact of the migrant drownings and arrivals on the fishing industry, already and more seriously damaged by international trawlers, Lampedusa is a pawn in a much longer game of colonial and postcolonial indebtedness, resentment and deals. The island is part of the Sicilian province of Agrigento, but, 125 miles from Sicily itself, it is only 70 miles from north Africa, and as such is a natural landing place for migrants from Libya, and for the many thousands travelling through Libya from other north, west, and east African states. The relationship of Italy, the sovereign governor of Lampedusa, and Libya, is a protracted negotiation between regional and practical necessities. As Stefano hauls bodies to the shore is he paying off the smugglers' debts to the migrants? or (and?) is he an agent of the Italian and Libyan states, the debt collector, pulling in the wreckage of a system built on usury and the exploitation of the desperate?

There is a sense in which Stefano's conflicted status is answered by Denise, rendering the play at least as much about Lustgarten's sensibility to urban Britain as the challenges facing the Italian island. Denise is a British woman of mixed ethnicity living in the northern city of Leeds. She is academically talented, studying sociology, and she works as a debt collector. Stefano is the collector of refugees, but Denise enunciates debt itself through her professional explanations and authority. The contradictions which she embodies I would suggest sit at the heart of this play. In other words, the logic of representation is *not that of one individual or group and the relations of power that they exhibit* (if it were one would simply note that the refugees are not on stage, do not speak on their own behalf, and indeed have no 'performative agency' (Bhimji, 2016, 83)[x], and that therefore the play is a failure) but *of the processes of capitalism that govern them all*.

Before I talk more about the play, its context and its logic of representation, I would however just like to invoke Eric Cazdyn's analysis of Michel Haneke's film *Caché* (*Hidden*, 2005). Cazdyn refers to the film in the context of a wider discussion of how culture contributes to the oppressive and murderous forces of capitalism. 'So many die not because capitalism is failing but because it is succeeding, because it is fulfilling its logic — a fact more visible today than at any time in recent history' (Cazdyn, 2007, 336). *Caché*, argues Cazdyn, 'de-centers representation by asking not what something stands for but how it works' (338). Meaning is immanent to the text, and in this case to the cinematography of that text, but it does not offer any final symbolic unity nor a resolution of the failure of history (the French history in Algeria in this case) nor a way forward that will amend and relieve the suffering of the protagonists. Lustgarten, by comparison, similarly seeks to show how the relationships between residents, migrants and refugees work in the context of radical capitalism, but he also tries to invoke the possibility of a future that denies the machinations of capital (here the reduction of human relations to the incapacities of debt) by imagining friendship as an alternative world order.

***Lampedusa* and Britain**

> They take all the little things that people do to make a good impression, the things we do to prove that we are human beings, and they use them to fuck you. That's the cruelty, the breathtaking cruelty of it ('Denise', Lustgarten, 16).

I saw the play performed at The Unity,[xi] five months after its UK premiere at the Soho Theatre in London in April 2015.[xii] I refer to the Liverpool production also because the UK aspect of the play itself is set in Leeds, another northern British city, and the play felt at home in the Liverpool context. It is a very British play and that is its strength as much as its constraint. The idea of Lampedusa is, as are the named migrants and refugees, moderated by the perspective of the speaking roles, and to a large degree Stefano's story is overwhelmed by the strength of Denise's situated character development. I should state that while I came to the production as a film scholar interested in representations of migrancy and refugees, I was also observing as a one-time professional actor, whose work had included two-handers and plays dealing with social disadvantage in the Britain (specifically north Yorkshire, the south coast, and London of the 1980s). After nearly thirty years, including two decades away in China and Australia, the persistence of inequality and the implications for long term poverty of the structural embeddedness of debt in Britain, are both disappointing and deeply sad. Even as I write today (in late 2017) there are discussions about a new benefit system, 'universal credit', in the UK that requires claimants to wait first six weeks, and thereafter four weeks, for payments. The government minister on the radio in my host's kitchen enthuses that this will introduce people to the realities of work – in particular, waiting at least a month to be paid. Why? I think. Where I have been living for two decades, everyone is paid fortnightly. It helps everyone manage their bills, their use of credit, and their savings. Wherefore this strange British moral imperative for a regular four-week credit gift to employers at the expense of pushing the poor into debt?[xiii]

Lampedusa raises this issue through – but also in spite of – its portrayal of refugee and migrant situations. It is, in Cazdyn's schema, a story that reveals the meaning of all the stories without fixing their historical or current agonies beyond the shared knowledge of deaths at sea in the Mediterranean and austerity in the United Kingdom. The status of Denise and Stefano as significant types aligns through the staging with their geographic separation - isolated from one another by spots of light and darkness. One speaks in the light and then waits silently in the dark, or walks out of the performance circle. The theatre at Unity is small and the actors are proximate, as one speaks the other waits in the dark. This closeness, to a degree, lends them an affinity which affords the play's coherence. In their final scene, the light stays on Denise and comes up on Stefano. They see each other. Two Europeans struggling with hardship, their own and others', not really that far apart after all. This bi-spatial strategy is not exceptionally innovative, but is nonetheless effective. It draws on a dramatic heritage of internal monologue combined with a reciprocity between the actors as performers and the characters that they inhabit. The sharing of space creates an environment of patience and respect. There is absence nonetheless. The technique juxtaposes the voices of Denise and Stefano with one another and with the silent listening of the audience. These three points of contact are co-present. The refugees and migrant characters are in other imagined space(s), constructed in the protagonists' stories but otherwise not performed. Thus, it is arguable that this is not a play about refugees or migrants as agents but rather concerns their assumed presence in contemporary Britain, with the island of Lampedusa playing the role of a remote background narrative to British anxiety about a national script of debt, inequality and social atomisation.

The realities of geopolitical options and contexts for the UK have shifted since the play's 2015 productions. In the British general election campaign of 2017, the strongest bones of contention were social care and the demise of public health services. In the same month and year, the international world press awards for photographic journalism included a large proportion of images of refugees on unsafe boats,[xiv] while the presence of a new United States president (Donald Trump) at a G7 summit in Sicily scuppered the Italian government's attempt to achieve an accord on common responsibility for refugee management and welfare (Wintour, 2017). Would a British woman studying sociology really imagine hopefully that that she would go to America to fulfil her dreams after the 2016 election of Donald Trump? Would she be confident to move in with her new friend, the Portuguese migrant, Carolina, given that the uncertain status of European residents after the British decision (referendum in June 2016, and Notification of Withdrawal Act in January 2017)[xv] to leave the European Union may or may not include residency protections? So much has changed, so much will change, and so much is now known to be unknown. Yet, while the immediate localised political realities of the play may not persist in precisely the formation of Lustgarten's play, the contradictions of opportunity and objectives between the indebted many and the entitled few are likely to do so. *Lampedusa* does not attempt a logic or representative presence but elects rather to speak to the cutting edge of wider global capital relations, exposing what has been called by the political philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato, 'governing by debt' (2015).

Lustgarten's inspired use of debt as a core feature of economic or forced migration, as a driver for flight, as an untrustworthy enabler in transit and in re-settlement but also as a subjective condition in capitalist society, dramatizes the punctum of contemporary social relations. By exploring the subjectivity of the debtor as a person that must imagine goodness in the stranger, Lustgarten finds, as sociologists and theorists of debt have noted before him, that the debtor is the cornerstone (we might say fall guy) of prevailing tactics for the reproduction of power in neo-liberal economic systems (Lazzarato, 2012). While the everyday debtors – most obviously from depressed social classes resident within the boundaries of the state - are enmeshed in systemic uncertainty, the debt incurred by refugees as a pre-requisite for escape (paying for travel, shelter, food, and sometimes even for settlement services on arrival) also places them immediately into the category of debtor, whatever their previous socio-economic status before they left their home. Many refugees are born into statelessness, a vulnerable formation of personhood, similar to the familiar class-mandated poverty of many societies including that of Britain. The relationships described within the play suggest how the centrality of debt to everyday life produces hierarchical networks of debtors, and thus exacerbates divisions amongst those who might do better to collaborate. The divisions are inevitable (or so it seems at first) because human relationships are secondary to the protagonists' primary relationship to debt itself, a perverse connection which is both desired and fatal. What we may call the debtor's fatality is both an absolute, the cause of physical death, and a form of social disappearance which mimics death. Lustgarten's aim is to expose and then undermine and offset this underlying narrative with individual stories of reciprocity, as protagonists learn to recognise a benevolent humanity that exceeds the strictures of personhood, debt and servility. This relation could be termed 'sympathy' – especially as defined by Deleuze and Parnet as 'exertion' and bodily 'penetration' (Hamilakis, 2017, 172).[xvi] I note again the obvious problem that the play only speaks through the settled characters not the migrants or refugees themselves, so that any sympathy is that expressed by the speaking protagonists, but is simultaneously the gift these same protagonists receive from their refugee and migrant friends.

In sympathy with Esposito, the British political and cultural anthropologist and historian of debt, David Graeber, has explored the chilling continuum between the ancient slave and the modern debtor in the construction of ancient and modern systems of control, with the concepts of honour, sociality and normative morality holding people in place through their own will as well as through violence (2011, 166-167). An ancient slave was adjudged 'socially dead', more thing (*res*) than human, (162) while a modern debtor is pursued by debt collectors, and excluded as a full citizen – debtors receive very little protection in law from harassment for example – and yet is nonetheless central to the workings of finance which relies on the debt of others in order to function. Graeber is openly anti-corporate and anti-capital in his political life, but less high profile, politically at least, legal scholars have also noted (presciently before the crash of 2008) that structure and culture go hand in hand in the production and reproduction of both poverty and debt:

> Poverty scholars then developed a reinforcing cultural account of poverty, finding that structural problems produced a culture of resignation, impulsivity, and present-time orientation leading to lack of interest in delaying gratification (Braucher, 2006, 328).

While Braucher, above, argues that (a)morality and culture are not sufficient explanations for the rise of debt, theorists such as Lazzarato and Graeber go further. The *necessary* slippage between the machine of finance capital and the weight of individual responsibility is summed up by the former, 'the norm remains external, it is still produced by the socio-economic system, but everything occurs as if the norm originated in the individual, as if it came solely from the individual' (Lazzarato, 2012, 186). This concurs with Lauren Berlant's seminal analysis of social cruelty 'cruel optimism', where she describes how the working poor are induced to enslave themselves to an improbable future that will be better than their current plight (2011). Berlant argues that the poor are required to self-medicate with false hope and 'inherited fantasy' (31). Citing Geoff Ryman's Dorothy fable *Was*, in which Dorothy is utterly brutalised and her dog Toto is murdered, Berlant goes further and suggests that the body of the poor man, poor woman or poor child, is only one truthful utterance away from madness, 'From here she regresses to yelping … to become the size she feels, … an embodiment ofn the last thing she loved. … To protect her last iota of optimism, she [Dorothy] goes crazy' (47-48). Berlant's thesis, especially when read together with those who like Braucher have shown the mechanisms of debt and impoverishment in the credit industries, is also most relevant to the play's wider ramifications. Denise talks about the 'breathtaking cruelty' (quoted above) of what is done to the poor. She refers, possibly despite herself as this is early in her trajectory towards kindness, to these indebted individuals, each carrying blame for a system that feeds from their vulnerability and capitalises on their hope.

If social science exposes the somatic traps of indebtedness, Esposito as a philosopher insists that debt is an absolute clause in the social contract that binds members of a society, or community together. The bringing onshore of a rescued child, woman or man could be conceived of as a form of gift or *munus*, one not requiring anything other than acceptance as a gift to the community, albeit that the child will henceforward be indebted to that community through its life choices and ways of belonging. ‘Far from voluntary, Esposito (2010: 5) describes the *munus* as ‘the gift that one gives because one must give and because one cannot not give’ (Tierney, 2016, 57). Debt is not appropriate in the gift that may not be requited but is calculated into the welcome to community, which is why demanding the payment of debts at sea turn the people smugglers from saviours to villains, and why those who demand gratitude from refugees still do not understand the nature of their arrival. But sympathy might be worth owning when it binds people together in a context of mutual living. This is quite different from the neo-liberal debt of the indebted man (or the ancient debt of the slave), and comes close to the decency of Denise’s new friend, Carolina, who is reportedly shocked at the filth in which Denise allows her mother to exist but responds by sharing her own home with Denise. This form of reciprocity builds a sense of belonging together and owing each other continuing respect and support, rather than the forced debt of the administration of fear and the expectation that the incomer takes on the aspect of the settled.

Carolina’s hospitable and generous welcome to Denise, despite the latter’s original mission to collect money from her, is mirrored in Stefano’s story through his growing friendship with Modibo, a Malian mechanic who ‘gives’ more than he takes in day to day contact on the island. He helps with mending the boat, he buys Stefano coffee, and he is just good to have around, a mate. He is not indebted on arrival (whatever his actual financial position – we are not informed of that), because *he knows that he is not*. At the end of the play Stefano reciprocates, and saves Modibo’s wife, Aminata, from drowning. His ecstatic last line of the play is a challenge to all of us to free ourselves of the affect of fear that characterises us as debtors, or free others from the same, and embrace hope:

> I defy you to see the joy in Modibo and Aminata's faces and not feel hope, I defy you (33).

This is also perhaps where the play reaches for a conclusion and falters. Stefano may be trusted to report that he has seen joy on the faces of a reunited man and woman. But to enjoin the audience to cast off the shackles of capitalist logic through an engagement with joy is problematic, when that joy is itself appropriated from the body (face) of the refugee. A practice that finds strategies to collaborate with refugee actors and speakers rather than enunciate them as a distant source of ecstasy achieves a more identifiably political outcome. As Bhimji comments in respect to refugee theatre work in Berlin:

> In this regard, performance art not only becomes part of a larger political movement for refugees' rights, but that the refugees' voices together with the actors' voices become intrinsically a collaborative political movement, where the voices of refugee activists manifest political expressions and the voices of the theater team express solidarity with the wider refugee movement (92).

But if we return to the earlier progress of the play, and to the vibrant, angry and violent Denise, Lustgarten is on firmer ground and possibly we begin to understand his purpose, or at least his political instinct. Denise, we recall, is a debt-collector (collections agent in US terminology) in Britain, pre-Brexit[xvii] but mid-austerity. Her job is not a new creation, debt collectors have a long history, but Lustgarten's decision to point up the condition of Britain's working and non-working poor in a period of retraction and hardship is well made. Austerity was sold politically as a response to global financial crisis, but, in terms of its impact, has been characterised as the cynical deployment of debt to protect the interests of the 1% against the interests of the rest of humanity, the 99%, (a tagline made famous by David Graeber through his involvement in the Occupy Movement). Over recent years there has been a shift from public perceptions that austerity was 'necessary' to that it was 'harmful', and close to the Occupy analysis (Borges et al, 2013). Occupy protests, possibly best known in the United States, also took place in Britain, generally with a strong emphasis on zero-hour contracts, a system which transfers risk to the employee away from the employer and increases over-indebtedness due to uncertainty of employment (Stevens, 2015, 18-19). It is this transfer of risk that I noted in the new UK benefits system referred to earlier and it is very much aligned to the expectation that the poor will carry debt on behalf of the wealthy. The terminology 'carry debt' acknowledges the bodily labour and psychological burden of indebtedness. Denise's journey towards a kinder version of herself, occurs through the kindness of Carolina. But she is already alert to the circumstances in which she works, although it takes the death of her own mother (Mam) for her to fully realise that the people she is paid to harass are just another kind of family.

> Eventually she stops crying and turns to reach into her handbag, and when she turns back, she has Mam's face. Her dead grey stare, full of reproach.
>
> Fucking hell.
>
> I give the old dear another week and sprint out the doors, down the stairs, can't wait for the lift, flight after flight of stairs, she lives on the fourteenth floor, and behind me her tearful voice echoing down the stairwell, calling out in gratitude.
>
> *Beat*
>
> I quit the job that afternoon.
> Packed it in. I just fucking couldn't anymore, you know? (30).

Denise is speaking from the innards of the British experience. Her mother teeters on the edge of debt and is distraught when the State removes her welfare payments on the excuse that Denise has the capacity to care for her. This demand collapses Denise's hopes of a better life. The State's decision indicates a claim that her mother has on her daughter's future, a claim that the State seeks to realise and collect on her behalf. The results of the ensuing stress of what becomes a disputed arena of responsibility between daughter, mother and the State, is the mother's collapse and death from a heart attack. The mother's social death is realised as an actual sacrifice against her daughter's possible future.

> The peculiarity of the debt crisis is that its causes have been raised to the level of remedy (Lazzarato, 2015, 7).

That apparent contradiction is re-visited, again in the British context, in a conversation between academics Rebecca Bramall and Jeremy Gilbert, and Labour economist

James Meadway (Bramall, Gilbert and Meadway, 2016). Bramall notes that there are ways in which the politics of the future may be confused with the politics of debt. She points out that the moral aspect of austerity (living within your means) aligns with the politics of environmentalism, (doing less harm through using less of the world's resources) while Gilbert agrees that the tradition of 'economic moralism' in the 'English liberal tradition'(127) makes it difficult to argue successfully against austerity – or at least while it was not clearly favouring the few against the many, a point that Meadway links implicitly to the unevenness of debt post the financial crash of 2008,

> the real issue … concentration of debt [and that] … since 2008 the period of austerity has been one in which the richer chunk of the population, say the top twenty per cent have been paying down debt. And the poorer chunk, around the bottom twenty percent have been taking on more and more debt (126).

Denise's targets are the bottom twenty percent that Meadway identifies as 'the poorer chunk' and who, in her initial opinion, are not only poor, but also maladjusted, lazy, unlucky, (as well as old, young, male, female, fit, disabled and so forth). They are how she earns a living and she doesn't bear them much sympathy. Denise's clients are generally working class but, in a world without much class solidarity for comfort, the class tag doesn't produce an alternative to the creditors' knock.[xviii] Denise's tales of doorstep encounters are brutally judgemental but, as she begins to make imaginative connections with her own struggle to resist working as a carer for her mother, to gain an education, she grasps how the system produces these 'losers', 'the poorer chunk'. The Bramall-Gilbert-Meadway conversation unpicks some of the contradictions that Denise embodies – she hates the debtors who keep her in work, and she resents the mother whose disability and lack of education entrap Denise in a world she loathes – but she understands that world very well, at least as well as those who really benefit, the 1%. Her moment comes after her departure from the 'old dear's' apartment, and her race down the stairs towards a different kind of engagement with people and with life. The final prop in the play is a letter, containing Denise's exam results. She is finally optimistic about her future, and confident about her intelligence. She tells us that greed is not, after all, legion, and that people can rid themselves of delusions, the sort of delusions that fuel governance by debt.

> I wrote that the monkey trap experiment is fundamentally an indicator of hope. It speaks to our ability to walk away from delusions, from traps. To save ourselves from our baser instincts (32).

This realisation, like Stefano's last line, is ecstatic and optimistic, but does not rely on the appropriation of another person's experience of joy, or political currency as a refugee, to make its point. This open-hearted engagement with one's own future and one's sense of the world at hand might be described - as Bhimji does in relation to refugee theatre, actors and voice (above) - as *solidarity*.

Debt and the Body

Debt collection is an under-regulated activity in Britain and one which works hand in glove with loan sharks and stand-over men, and women, harbingers of the baser instincts. Occasional news reports of tragedies produce calls for regulation, as in the 2017 case of Jerome Rogers, a 19-year-old courier who killed himself in the midst of a spiralling debt collection situation (Taylor, 2017). It's a tragically ironic narrative. A young man who carried information (presumably documents) that needed to get somewhere fast to fuel other people's businesses then found himself carrying the burden of debt. His story is his own, but the cruelty of the system that enabled the tragedy persists. Debt collectors have a number of strategies that are quasi-legal in tone but ultimately reliant on intimidation through the manipulation of guilt, fear and anxiety, for their success. Joe Deville's analysis of the business and practices of debt collection describes the history of the debt collection business in the US and the UK, showing how advances in technologies of control and influence, developed alongside new mechanisms of credit in the US, and transferred over time to the UK (2015). Deville's respondents include individuals who accept their debt, but whose route to their situation is difficult to see as blameworthy. Some have been cheated by company default, but – because of the small scale of their own operations - are personally liable for the resulting impact on their finances. Others are single parents juggling immediate expenses against low incomes, high rents, and a shrinking social welfare program. The underlying position of his research is the larger story of how modern economies are organised on speculation and debt, and that it is the smaller debtor who pays the price for that system (44-68). Deville's book reviews the history of debt collection, he deconstructs and describes its mechanisms, and he interviews those who work in the industry. He draws on affect theories to explain how the indebtedness of the individual becomes intrinsic to their being in the world. Their relationships with technologies, with the world of work, with the people they live with and with the very spaces of home and community, are immersed in the awareness of their debt. It is horribly logical when someone decides to suicide their way out of the situation, as the process of indebtedness has produced a sense of self infused with an overriding sense of the hopelessness of the debt. By killing the body the debtor wants to kill the debt. Metaphors of cancer and chemotherapy, infection and amputation, as well as the brutal fact of suicide come to mind.

Deville also describes how debt collection has used the services of psychologists to advance the industry's capability in extracting promises and payments from those in default. He shows how these methods impact the health and stress levels of the debtor (often already compromised by the fact of debt in their lives and the uncertainty of their income and financial security). His case studies demonstrate that moral vilification associated with debt is generally deeply unjust, as debt results from a mismatch between the cost of living and the level of income. Doubtless there are those who live beyond their means recklessly – albeit always encouraged to do so by an economy built on consumption rather than thrift. The point is that the onslaught of the debt collection process, and in particular its speed and relentless harassment, is designed explicitly to tie the target to their debt through the engendering of an emotional affect, generally experienced as an invasive and consuming fear,

> Angela, for instance, reflected that life in debt 'just feels like . . . fear. Feels like just a bit of fear. Like fear like someone's out to get you, or somebody can harm you, or you're in danger. I can't really explain it'. She continued later: 'it's made me more of a sad person in some ways (55).

Paul Virilio (2012) has analysed the relation between acceleration, speed, and the administration of fear, as a form of terrorism in modern life. He argues that the dominance of speed dissolves the securities of space, and reminds us of Arendt's ' "law of movement" … there is no relationship to terror without a relationship to life and speed'(21). The collapse of space into time is a classic understanding of globalisation, but here in Deville's subject 'Angela', it has a particular resonance, as she finds herself dissolving into the subjectivity of (sad) debtor, literally terrorised into submission to her status as Lazzarato's indebted (wo)man. Yes, Virilio is speaking about actual violence, global terror if you like, and about climate collapse, but what he terms the administration of fear seems utterly apt for the debt collection process and its complicity with a broader violence against the poorer and more vulnerable, people whose lack of means render their lives more porous and dissolvable.[xix]

The composite parts of the debt collection process underline its sheer, unforgiving, pace. The pursuit of debt uses a specific sequence of letters, accelerating the threat of legal action, placing a Continuous Payment Authority on bank accounts without letting the debtor know that they have the right to remove it within a certain number of days,[xx] threatening bailiffs (in advance of any actual legal recourse to the forced removal of property), and using typescripts (red letters, capital 'shouting' and so forth) to visually transmit impending disaster for the recipient. These letters are followed by phone calls to every private telephone number that the collection agency can find. The phone rings insistently, repeatedly, often starting early in the morning and continuing into the evening. The harassment is intended to invade every aspect of the debtor's life (and indeed, the same treatment is meted out to people who repudiate the debts, as creditors sell debt on in the expectation that those they attack won't afford a court case). As the harassment escalates, usually extremely quickly, the debtor's home feels unsafe, and their capacity to communicate with the outside world is reduced. Their presence on social media is threatened as collectors stalk them on Facebook, and/or buy premium memberships of Linked In and similar sites to check out their business activities and friendship circles. Such activities force the debtors to either settle (whether or not the debt is actual and legitimate, and whether or not they can afford to do so) or hide from everyday forms of sociality and communication.[xxi] Asylum seekers privately report a similar sense of isolation and shame when they owe money to community members or when they are simply too poor to engage in community life.

The debt collection process is of course central to Denise's story but it is also relevant to the impacts of forced migration, and the forms of subjective disappearance wreaked through the administration of fear on refugees and asylum seekers in so-called places of refuge.[xxii] The debt collection process, described above, is resonant with the forms of coercion, passive aggression, precarity and inconsistency that visa agencies foist on asylum seekers today. Examples would be invidious as these practices are widespread but also whimsical and transient. Policies change rapidly and each shift creates incertainty and undermines individual confidence in their athority over their own future. The point for this analysis of *Lampedusa* and the body, is that the somatic security of the individual refugee is rendered dangerously uncertain by the state just as the body of the debtor is rendered unstable by the debt collector, operating in a system governed by debt. Refugees, debtors and asylum seekers are threatened in terms of where s/he might live, whether s/he can work, and how and if s/he can live without securing consecutive loans from anyone who is enabled or willing to lend and at whatever price. It is in this resonance of such everyday cruelty that I would suggest Lustgarten has found a way of representing refugee/asylum seeker experience *without* simply appropriating a story and placing it on stage for our settled scrutiny. Modibo, Carolina and Aminata are attractive characters but they do not speak and we cannot hear their voices through or above the intensity of the speaking protagonists who demand our immediate attention. Lustgarten achieves a more general representation by revealing how the psychodynamic practices of host nations, towards their own as well as towards the strangers amongst us, become a script for subjugation that is practised in default.

In Denise, Lustgarten creates a protagonist who expresses this script on her own behalf and in relation to her neighbours. Denise is a student and her commitment to pay for her education as she goes, is her way out, to escape the debtors' condition which she has observed at close quarters and to which she contributes. But, in fact, she cannot pay and study her way out of the world which she despises, without taking on a student loan (and in the end, without moving in with Carolina to share rent). The paradoxical relationship between tertiary students and debt is captured in Ben Pitcher's analysis of the future orientation of debt and its peculiarly strong attraction to those who can see no future without making the investments required of them by the mechanisms of cost recovery:

> Although the current UK HE debt regime has led to a fall in applications from more wealthy students, those from lower socio-economic groups 'express a strong belief in the ability of higher education to offer them greater opportunities and incomes than would otherwise be available (2016, 58).

Pitcher is arguing that this phenomenon is indicative of the legibility of money (what you can buy and how you can buy it, or not) – over criteria of access and exclusion based on cultural difference, age, race, family, and class. Money, and by extension, credit which becomes debt, affords equal access to the future, whatever the status of the present. It is therefore a powerful rhetorical political tool through which to ensure support or at least acquiescence with policies and systems that seem to be antagonistic to communities and populations who have experienced poverty, discrimination or other forms of lowered opportunity. Toruño (above) has made the same point.

It is in the context of expounding on the shared conditions of subjugation, moral exhaustion, and indebted diminishment of the human spirit that I would judge Lustgarten's play. His representation of actually named refugees and migrants is sketchy at best and sentimental at worst. Yet, if his intention is to show exactly how such sentimentality plays into a dream of a community that crosses borders and evades the exigencies of neo-liberalism then it has strength, and poses a challenge to the audience and how they respond to the monologues. However, Lustgarten's emphasis on hope through reciprocity, rather than hope returning in the form of indebted desperation, offers an ethically progressive outcome, if not an easy political solution and even if the inclusion of the stories of refugees is an unfinished and under-realised aspect of his approach. Indeed, one might argue that the minimal storytelling on the past life and travels of Modibo (in the third person of Stefano) and similarly of Carolina (through Denise) is sensitive to the onus on settled peoples to think about their own status as hosts to one another before questioning the stranger on the dramatic quality of their migration. In this sense the body of the refugee / asylum seeker / migrant is protected from the burden of representation in *Lampedusa*. Moreover, if one follows Cazdyn on Haneke, and allows that Lustgarten too 'de-centers representation by asking not what something stands for but how it works' (338) then it becomes possible to recognise in the play's use of parallel first-person narration a greater social and political ambition, to whit the necessity to represent the circumstances of arrival as a shared responsibility to fight governance by debt, or by enforced gratitude to a host. With this perspective in mind one can see that the play might go not only beyond representation and the danger of sentiment but also towards a multi-layered socio-political critique and the opportunity for solidarity.

<< Insert Figure One here >> 'Stefano (Steven Elder) and Denise (Louise Mae-Newberry)' Courtesy Unity Theatre.

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[i] Thanks to Matthew Linley, Director of Unity Theatre Liverpool, for his assistance. Funding for the project to which this article relates came from the Australian Research Council.

[ii] On the Unity Theatre website. http://www.unitytheatreliverpool.co.uk/lampedusa-3.html

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The published print copy shows two men in a series by Alberto Pizzoli 'Libya – Italy – Immigration'. Getty images. Stock images at: http://www.gettyimages.com.au/photos/alberto-pizzolilampedusa?excludenudity=true&mediatype=photography&page=2&phrase=alberto%20pizzoli%20Lampedusa&sort=mostpopular&family=editorial

[iii] Aminata is herself imagined on her journey by Modibo, placing her at another remove of desire and connection.

[iv] An analysis of the debt system in Canada indicated that 70% were either paid or paying off loan with data taken over a ten-year period. The Canadian Authority for Citizenship and Immigration concluded from their 2015 report that loans aided settlement (CACI, 2015, 40), see also Ben Pitcher (2016).

[v] 355C. A person to whom temporary protection is granted will be granted limited leave to enter or remain, which is not to be subject to a condition prohibiting employment, for a period not exceeding 12 months. On the expiry of this period, he will be entitled to apply for an extension of this limited leave for successive periods of 6 months thereafter. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-part-11a-temporary-protection Accessed 11 October 2017. 'Barriers to education for those seeking asylum and refugees on temporary visas,' Refugee Council of Australia, July 2015. http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/1512-Education.pdf accessed 13 October 2017.

[vi] This frustration and its capacity to nullify the subject were explored in the panel discussion, 'Debt and the Modern Refugee', held at the Tyree Room, UNSW, 4.12.2017 and featuring Tina M.Dixson, Om Dhungel, Rahim Savari.

[vii] Greg Noble also explores the rapidity in which citizens who are made to feel other to society lost their ontological bearing and confidence (2005).

[viii] My reference to the Biblical contradiction between the tax collectors (Matthew 11.19) and Jesus and his disciples as fisher of men is intentional, (Mark 1, 16-20).

[ix] Spruce compares the October 2013 introduction of Mare Nostrum search and rescue with the imperialist and Fascist aspirations of the 1940s to control the Mediterranean. Albahari points out that the EU procedures were less well funded than the original, but short-lived, Italian effort.

[x] Bhimji's phrasing is a neat encapsulation of arguments around representations and voice.

[xi] Dir. Steven Atkinson, High Tide Theatre Company, performed Unity Theatre Liverpool 24 September – 3 October. 2015.

[xii] An earlier version of the play – a three-hander which included a speaking role for Modibo's wife Aminata, - was directed by Dritero Kaspari at Sweden's Royal Dramatic Theatre.

[xiii] https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b0991fb0/daily-politics-11102017 A discussion on a BBC Radio Show – Daily Politics – 11/10/2017. Archived version accessed 12/10/2017.

[xiv] Notably, the work of Mathieu Wilcocks (UK), placed 3rd in the Spot News section, included images of distressed children and adults on boats, and an aerial view of a corpse floating on the Mediterranean Sea, alone wearing an apparently useless life jacket. World Press Photo Awards, online. https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2017/spot-news/mathieu-willcocks at New South Wales State Library, Sydney, May-June 2017, http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/world-press-photo-17

[xv] The Referendum took place on the 23 June 2016. Results were announced on the 24th. http://www.bbc.com/news/politics/eu_referendum/results, accessed 25 May 2017. European Union (Notification of Withdrawal Act), 2017 is available at on the House of Commons website. http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2016-17/europeanunionnotificationofwithdrawal.html

[xvi] For an acute and comprehensive recap of the sympathy versus empathy debate see (Cooke, 2017, 153-169).

[xvii] Brexit was the term applied to the campaign to leave the European Union, and the subsequent decision to do so. The neologism became a rallying call for both so-called Remain and Leave campaigners – the Remainers seeing Brexit and Brexiteers in a poor light. The word was, ironically perhaps, coined by a Remain campaigner, Peter Wilding. (Tom Mosely 2016)

[xviii] Liam Stanley, Joe Deville and Johnna Montgomerie have argued that digital support groups exist to provide advice and solidarity to debtors facing punitive creditors and collection agencies. There is little evidence that these approximate the identity politics of class groupings but there is some sense of radical refusal (as in the debt strikes seen in the USA): 'In positing the existence of a moral economy of debt within which its more familiar economic relations are wrapped up, whether by contrasting narrowly defined economic responsibilities to notions of fairness, or by disputing a creditor's moral authority to collect on a particular debt, forum contributors highlight the degree to which debt products are ethico-political constructions.'(Stanley, Deville and Montgomerie, 2016, 82).

[xix] There is resonance with Kara Walker's dissolving statues of sugar babies and a giant Sphinx-female slave made of sugar and installed in an old sugar refinery, (Hamilakis, 169-172). See also the installation Exit (2008-2015), inspired by Paul Virilio's work on speed, migration and climate collapse. Recently (2016-

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2017) updated and presented in tandem with the Refugee Alternatives conference, Sydney. https://www.artdesign.unsw.edu.au/unsw-galleries/exit Non-immersive version available https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyMbF2uuSIw Accessed 1.01.2018.

[xx] Denise refers to this tactic in her first long speech, and only reveals the antidote when she has met Carolina and helps her with advice, placing the audience as potential debtors from whom trade secrets should be kept.

[xxi] Author interview with debt collection lawyers, (by telephone) Liverpool UK, September 2015.

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