Austerity Gardens: The Poetics and Politics of Gardening in Hard Times

Trent B46, 4pm, Wednesday 19th June

Dr Naomi Milthorpe, University of Tasmania

What does it mean to garden in hard times, and why might humans turn to the garden (as shelter, refuge, or productive space) under straitened conditions? How do poets, writers and cultural critics contend with and represent the garden or their own gardening as they are changed by austerity? What does an austere garden look, feel, sound, taste, and smell like?

Gardens are liminal spaces, private zones, and contested sites, mobilized against foreign invaders whether human or nonhuman. Gardens and gardening are in place and practice revelatory of shifting, contingent, and multiple modes of gender, class, racial, religious and sexual identity. They are idealized, yet ever-incomplete, utopian sites.

Gardening is also big business: 2017 market reports indicated increased demand for DIY products in the decade since the global financial crisis ("Millennials Dominate" 2017).

Thus gardening and garden literature provides rich soil for understanding the commodification and uses of culture, whether highbrow or popular, as embodied in gardening from the mid-to-late 20th century and beyond.

Austerity is an historically-inflected concept associated most particularly with the policies of World War Two Britain, and latterly, Europe following the Global Financial Crisis, but its ideological, aesthetic, and practical roots stretch beyond those particular historical and geographical contexts. This paper will seek to map out some of the borders of austerity gardening, and particularly, its representation and practice in popular and literary texts.

Naomi Milthorpe is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Tasmania. Her research centres on modernist, interwar, and mid-century British literary culture. Naomi is the author of Evelyn Waugh's Satire: Texts and Contexts(FDUP, 2016), and is currently editing Waugh's Black Mischief for the Oxford University Press Complete Works of Evelyn
Waugh. She is the editor of the essay collection *The Poetics and Politics of Gardening in Hard Times* (Lexington, forthcoming) which features diverse essays on Vita Sackville-West, Beverley Nichols, nettles, thylacines, and many other topics exploring the material, affective and representational effects of austerity in the garden and garden writing.