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Critical: **Poetics and Identity in Ex-Mining Communities as Depicted in Contemporary and Post-Industrial Literature**

Creative: ***A Tree Grows in Creswell***

By

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Abstract

This research is the culmination of nearly thirty years of lived experience as a working-class queer woman from an ex-mining community raised in the aftermath of deindustrialisation. It builds on my Master's dissertation, in which I explored the ongoing trauma caused by deindustrialisation in the UK and its reflection in contemporary literature. This research digs deeper into a century of literature depicting the coal-mining experience, with a focus on female and queer perspectives, to examine the relationship between gender/sexual identities and industrial heritage. The interdisciplinary thesis combines historical research, literary analysis and community engagement/arts methods to paint a picture of coal mining identities from the early 20th century to the present day. In doing so, the thesis aims to make sense of fractured identities, to preserve and reclaim coal mining heritage, and to pave a way forward whilst remembering the past. The impact of the community arts projects that ran adjacent to this research is explored in the final chapter, with extracts from various reports provided in the appendices.

A Tree Grows in Creswell is a creative reflection of the research. It takes its name from an issue of *Coal* magazine published in 1950, reporting the community spirit in the aftermath of a pit disaster that killed eighty men in my home village. It is a response to the conversations and interactions that have defined this research. Both observational and self-exploratory, the poems look outwards to answer questions about my own identity as a working-class woman raised in the aftermath of deindustrialisation.

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Poetics and Identity in Ex-Mining Communities as Depicted in Contemporary and Post-Industrial Literature

"Imagine centipedes as tall as me." The old miner tells the classroom full of wide-eyed students on a school trip to Pleasley Pit Museum. "And dragonflies as big as seagulls."

He relishes in their wonder and proudly pulls out a handmade model of a giant blue Griffinfly, with a nine-centimetre-long wingspan. He holds it delicately, just out of reach of their grabbing fingers, and tells them that he made this model, based on the fossil found at a local coal mine in Bolsover. "It's in a museum now." He says, solemnly, then adds, "Somewhere down south."

He sets the scene. Deep time is an overwhelming concept for adults, but in a classroom powered by fifteen uninhibited imaginations, the walls give way to ferns and horsetails, swamp water sluices into our shoes, and the humidity intensifies. An insectile chorus starts to wail around us, but its choir exists somewhere stage left, just out of view. We only catch glimpses of life, conducting the carpet of flora, like fingers in a glissando. The miner stands before us, a distant memory, shoulder to shoulder with the ancient trees. The flame in the Davey Lamp hanging from his belt laps up the oxygen-rich air.

"It's called the Carboniferous period, on account of all the coal." He shouts at us, his voice barely audible over the insect song. "Coal was formed from prehistoric plants. They died and were buried under layers of sediment and water. Over millions of years, under immense pressure and heat, they formed coal seams. Can anyone tell me what we use coal for?"

The children look around at each other, hoping someone else knows the answer. One brave child raises a hand and asks, "What is coal?", just as the music reaches a crescendo.

At the Coalface

I began this research with a displaced sense of self, as a woman raised in the aftermath of coal mining, in a town defined by what it had lost. For years, I had grown up knowing about my coal mining heritage, but not understanding my part in it, having been born a generation removed and holding no memory of the headstocks that once defined our landscape. Yet, like many others my age, I inherited the trauma of the generations before me, who endured disasters, strikes and deindustrialisation. Without something physical to anchor to, these are the foundations upon which my identity was built.

The working title for this thesis was “The Poetry of Working-Class Female Identity in the British Coalfields”. I had hoped that in looking back through literary depictions of the female coalmining experience, I would find my grandmother, mother, myself. But what started as an exploration of working-class female identities quickly grew into something much bigger. Male perspectives could not be avoided at the start, as most of what we know about the female experience has been recorded through the male gaze. Through the exploration of writers such as D.H. Lawrence, we also gain an understanding of early explorations of sexuality and how the non-male experience was perceived through these perspectives. The research then grew to encompass queer perspectives and anything not heteronormative. The term ‘poetics’ also became more appropriate as the explored literature expanded to include more than just poetry. The working-class experience is documented in a multitude of poetic forms, including film, prose and participatory art. To only consider poetry is to further limit an already limited field. This thesis is largely concerned with the 20th and 21st centuries, though it is necessary for some exploration into the late 19th century to set the scene for the course of this research. Life as we know it would not look the same if it were not for the Industrial Revolution. The class system would not exist, industrial towns would not exist, and therefore, people like me would not exist. Also, this research, while alluding to coalfields across the UK, focuses specifically on the East Midlands coalfield, largely because it is relevant to my experience growing up in the area but also because it offers a rich and dynamic range of perspectives on coal mining and its aftermath. The region was widely known as the most divided during the strike, and it is important to me, as someone whose family was split by the strike, that both sides of the debate are given space.

This project has metamorphosed over its lifespan, though the motivations have remained the same: To determine how to reclaim and rebuild a fractured sense of identity in post-industrial communities, particularly within women and other marginalised groups.

Motivations I

As I write, I’m watched over by a black-eyed Wonder Woman Funko Pop. This is significant because she was gifted to me by a friend who calls me Wonder Woman. This friend was also called Wonder Woman by her students who gifted her the Funko Pop in the first place. She said that one day, another Wonder Woman will come along who will inherit the Funko Pop from me when I no longer need it. I’m writing about this now because I’m fresh from wrestling

with a poem inspired by the friend and the Funko Pop that led me down a mine shaft, thinking about our shared name:

> *We assume she is a noun. 1. A feeling of amazement or adoration. 2. A person or thing regarded as good or remarkable. But maybe she is a verb; to feel curious, doubtful, surprised. Or maybe she is a typo, a wanderer who wandered too far into the stars until there were none left to see. Maybe she is all of the above. Maybe that's why her eyes are starless skies.*

At times, I wander too far below ground until I can no longer see my hand before me. Like the trappers who spent their childhood sitting alone in the dark, listening out for that disembodied command to *shut your trap!* Sometimes, I hear them in dreams that startle me awake and bleed into reality like methane, undetectable to everyone else. In these moments, my unadjusted eyes are unable to tell the difference between sleep and awake. But then she takes shape in the darkness on my desk, and I remember why I continue wandering.

> *The one thing a trapper can be sure of is that their mother is always a small distance ahead. A knock on the ventilation door lets them know she's there. She labours through on all fours onto the main roadway, with a Gus Belt round her middle, harnessed to a skid trolley full of coal that she drags behind her like afterbirth.*

When I first learned that the 1842 Mines and Collieries Act, which prohibited the employment of women and girls in the mines, was protested by those it sought to protect, I was (Wonder [verb]: To feel) surprised. On the surface, it seems like a moral step in the right direction towards regulating coal mining conditions, and that is indeed how it was initially framed. The Act came after a Royal inquiry ordered by Queen Victoria, which investigated the conditions of mine workers following the disaster at Huskar Colliery in Silkstone. Twenty-six children between the ages of eight and sixteen lost their lives after a storm-burst stream overflowed into a ventilation drift. But then I found out that Lord Astley, who headed the inquiry, did not focus on this fact. Rather, he appealed to the Victorian middle-class by posing female mineworkers as unfit wives and mothers due to their clothing (or lack of), 'low sexual morals' and heavy

drinking. The total number of female mineworkers had more than halved by 1861.[1] It's no wonder (Noun: Feeling of amazement) since wages were determined by the amount of coal produced, meaning that this role was thrust entirely onto the men. Thus, the Act contributed towards the patriarchal notion of the separate spheres, which saw working-class women pushed ever further into the home.

It might seem odd for me to use such a tacky knick-knack to introduce a dark, dirty and dangerous story like this one, but it's the best way I can summarise the research in a way that is true to me. I am far detached from the 19th Century hurriers who suffered a loss of income, the pit brow lasses in Lancashire or the Shroppies in Staffordshire who adapted to a new working life, or the 20th Century home runners who remained stoic in the face of disaster. I can barely even touch my own grandmother, who pushed my mother and uncle in a pram through the streets of her home village as her neighbours lobbed insults of 'scab's wife' at her. I never saw the headstocks that punctuated their landscape, suffered a world-shaking pit disaster, or lived through a strike that tore families apart. And yet, the shared coal in our blood makes us wonderful in one way or another.

Motivations II

In a mentoring session as part of my enrolment in a creative development programme, my mentor asked me, "If you could go anywhere in space and time, where would you go and why?" I hate questions like this, especially when you are given too much room to overthink them, but in this moment, put on the spot as I was, my brain transported me to one place.

Crag Hill is a hill near the pedestrian entrance to Creswell Crags, hidden by a small, wooded area and marked by an old stone wall with a step gate. If you amble over the wall and make the short hike up the winding stony path, you come across a large boulder jutting out of the hillside, shielded from onlookers by foliage. From the boulder, you can see the whole of Creswell stretched out beyond the surrounding fields. For generations, teenagers have made the pilgrimage to mark the boulder as their own. You never see them there, but their memory lingers in the discarded cans of Frosty Jacks and the remnants of abandoned fires, claimed by the grass. When it was my turn, I visited the boulder with friends and childhood pets. No matter who I shared the view with, the unexplained feeling of loss always remained.

[1] Norena Shopland, Women in Welsh Coal Mining (Philadelphia, 2023) introduction.

Our local pit closed in 1991, and I was born in 1996. Growing up, my peers and I always felt as though we had just missed out on something. We existed in a twilight zone, as by-products of the strike and pit closures. Deindustrialisation is an oil spill, endlessly spreading and poisoning, despite the distance from the site of impact. We were nursed on trauma and raised in silence, but this feeling of loss was something that we could never quite put our finger on. From an early age, we knew not to ask too many questions.

It only needed to happen once, at my great-grandparents' bungalow, for me to get the message. For the purpose of this essay, I might have pretended that I could remember the last time I visited. But, all I remember is how it was then, from a child's perspective. The smell of old lady perfume, old lady soap and hot cabbage water. There was a cabinet, to the right of great-grandma's chair, creaking under the weight of one too many knick-knacks. My favourite was an orange cat with a forest green bowtie around its neck. It lay with one paw up in greeting, its face turned to the side, revealing a hollow, chipped ear. The tip had fallen inside the ear, through the head and into the cat's empty belly, but it never rattled. To the right, across the room, was one of those old radiators with the grills; a staple of every working-class household back then. More knick-knacks were lined at its feet, the most significant being three safety lamps, ordered according to size like a gutted Russian Doll. Mounted on the wall, above my great-grandad's chair, were three commemorative plates.

My grandad often borrowed my great-grandad's wheelbarrow. He'd wheel it from one end of Creswell to the other with me as its cargo. We had been returning it on the day I finally asked about the plates. My grandads had a good relationship. Grandad used to call great-grandad 'fatha', which confused me, because he was my grandma's dad. They both howled with laughter when I confronted them about this. But when I confronted them about the crockery that was on the wall and not in the cupboard, the laughter stopped.

Later, I learned that the strike had split my family, like many others, right down the middle. The silence that shrouded the subject for much of my life extended beyond our family. An entire community had lost its voice. During the strike, people wrote poetry to protect an identity that was erased as fast as it was pencilled in. Then, defeat ruptured the motivation to self-preserve.

My uncle died suddenly when I was in the thick of my Master's degree. After decades down the pit, it was his heart that failed him in the end. The surviving miners in my family are older than he was when he passed. A few months later, the local baths were demolished. It was a listed building, built back in 1929 for use by local miners and their families. It was a 'One Stop'

shop that was eventually raised from the rubble. The physical memory of our mining heritage and my personal connections to it were fading fast. This is what prompted me to write my dissertation on the trauma of deindustrialisation as depicted in the poetry of Ian McMillan and Helen Mort, building on research I had started during my undergraduate degree into my industrial heritage and exploring the feelings of displacement that it has started unearthing. It wasn't until I started my research that I understood what was missing from that view on the top of Crag Hill.

"If you could go anywhere in space and time, where would you go and why?"

I answered, "I'd go to Crag Hill, forty years ago and see the view complete with headstocks."

The Methods

The research I started by first asking about the commemorative plates at five years old was never supposed to make it to PhD level. As a working-class woman, it had never been on my radar as an option available to me. But the closer I mined towards that coal face, the more I came to understand my privileged position and the responsibility that came with it. I started the research with selfish motivations to salve my generation's fractured sense of identity. Then my motivations expanded and became more about paving a way forward, as influenced by my research methods, which have been qualitative rather than quantitative.

I didn't get funding for my research, so I have been entirely reliant on a Student Finance loan, meaning that, as a working-class woman, I had to continue working. In the first year of this research, I started working as a Visitor Assistant at Bolsover Castle. I also continued to develop my career as a freelance writer and creative practitioner. I have been very fortunate that the projects I have worked on alongside my research have both directly informed it and allowed me to put it into practice. I have frequently collaborated with local participatory arts organisations, including Junction Arts, Platform Thirty1 and Writing East Midlands, as well as heritage organisations such as English Heritage and the National Trust. I have also volunteered as the Poet-in-Residence at Pleasley Pit for the entire duration of my research.

The close analysis of coal mining literature forms the biggest bulk of this thesis. Interpretations might differ from person to person, so historiography is useful for contextualising creative texts, but the interpretation is just as important as the intent. Not only does poetry help us understand the author, but it also helps us understand the reader. Poetic

inquiry is a tool used in the creative element of this thesis, drawing on Lynn Butler-Kisber's definitions of the 'found poetry' method, wherein words are extracted from transcripts and shaped into poetic form, and 'generated' poetry, where researchers use their own words to share understandings of their own and/or others' experiences.[2]

Summary

My supervisor, Professor Adam Piette, said to me on multiple supervision meetings, "You're working at the coalface". By this, he means, I'm in the thick of it. Boots on the ground, coal-stained face, calloused hands. Too deep to turn back.

As an undergraduate, I wrote a poem that was published in the first edition of *This University Life* called 'Places Essays Were Written'. I note on a train, in between serving customers at the café I worked, at the end of a bar when out with friends, using the notes app in bed while my sister slept in the bunk below.[3] Like the generations of working-class people from coal mining communities before me, I, too, have always written on the margins. This is a concept that recurs throughout the thesis and one that is reflected in how it is written, as inspired by research by Katy Shaw. Therefore, I have decided to retain the authenticity of the essays and reflections to reflect the times in which they were written. The creative elements of this thesis jump around, travelling back and forth in time, from location to location. Some delve into deep metaphors inspired by objects in my line of vision at the time, and others use pop culture references to demonstrate the inner workings of my mind.

Chapter One is an exploration of early 20th-century female coal mining identities as depicted in writing by contemporary working-class female writers and the portrayal of women in writing by men and in modern historical fiction. Contemporary writing about the female coal mining experience by working-class women is limited, so the chapter draws on wider perspectives to give a rounded image of the women in coal mining communities and attitudes towards them. It looks specifically at writing by D.H. Lawrence, writing about the 1926 General Strike and writing that reflects the impact of mining disasters on the domestic sphere. It examines the theories of Sherry Lee Linkon, Pamela Ann Fox and Ian Haywood.

Chapter Two considers the working-class literature written during and about the 1984-5 Miners' Strike and how poetic activism was used as a self-preservation tool. It gives voice to

[2] Lynn Butler-Kisber, 'Poetic Inquiry' in *Poetry, Method and Education Research*, 2020.
[3] Tyler Turner, 'Places Essays Were Written' in *This University Life*, ed. Lisa Leak and Ryan Smith, p. 22.

the voiceless by creating space for alternative perspectives on the strike. It also delves into queer representation in post-industrial films to better understand the queer coal mining experience and the relationship between industrial identity and sexuality. Theories by Katy Shaw and Kelly Farrell are explored.

The final chapter is an expansion of the research started during my Master's. Although it marks the end of the thesis, it is actually where it all began. It considers the impact of deindustrialisation as expressed in post-industrial literature, such as that by Helen Mort and Andrew McMillan. The final essay reflects on the impact of participatory arts in ex-mining communities as a means of reconciling the past and present to pave the way forward, showcasing the work conducted alongside the research.

The collection that accompanies this thesis is a poetic reflection of the research that takes its name, *A Tree Grows in Creswell*, from the 1950 edition of *Coal* magazine that documents a mining disaster that happened in my home village.[4] The disaster cost the lives of eighty men. Almost one year for each life has passed since. The collection reflects on central themes that cropped up over the course of this project in conversations with community members, in workshops, and in my self-exploration, including life below ground, the impact of the Miners' Strike and pit closures, the tension between class identity and academia, and girlhood in a post-industrial setting. The title sequence in the collection is a Rukeyser-esque report of the disaster through found poetry, imagined interviews and poetic reflections that see the past in conversation with the present.

[44] 'A Tree Grows in Creswell' in *Coal* (1950) National Coal Mining Museum digital archive.

Chapter One – The Collier's Wife: Early 20th Century Female Coal mining Identities as Depicted by Contemporary Female Writers, Poetic Male Perspectives and as Captured in Creative Non-Fiction

Overview

The poem 'Interview' from *A Tree Grows in Creswell* is an imagined interview between my academic self, who is searching for answers within herself and the me she finds there, who is yet to begin searching. It forms part of a larger sequence that details a disaster that cost eighty miners their lives in Creswell, 1950. It reflects the disconnection I felt between myself and my great-grandmother, or at least, the part of her that was a miner's daughter, wife and mother. I knew a lot about her school days – she was very proud of the fact that she received a Grammar School scholarship – but I knew nothing about her experiences of that September day in 1950 and how it impacted her world as a young woman raised by coal.

She passed away before this research began, but I have searched for her and the women who came before her in the coal mining literature published in the early-mid Twentieth Century and in retrospective works of fiction and creative memoir. There is not a lot of published literature documenting the female coal mining experience during this period by contemporary female writers, but through the selected texts, a patchwork of perspectives offers a clear depiction of how these women were regarded by themselves and by others. This chapter explores male perceptions of the female coal mining experience in the early-mid 20th century, as well as literature produced by working-class women themselves, both at the time in question and in more recently published historical literature. In doing so, this chapter aims to offer a well-rounded image of the early 20th century coal mining female and to evidence the impact of industrial trauma, changing landscapes and political upheaval upon her experience.

It will begin to map a century of female experience shaped by death, disaster, and domesticity. It will defend working-class storytelling against claims of 'smokestack nostalgia' and instead situate it as a vessel for creating and maintaining social relationships bound by a shared sense of identity and loss. A further aim of this chapter is to make sense of a present that is so tightly bound to its past. Firstly, it will look at death, disaster and domesticity as depicted in more recent memoirs reflecting on the working-class coal mining experience and how this impacted female identities. Secondly, it will explore the impact of the coal mining experience upon female sexuality through a weird fiction lens, focusing predominantly on the

work of D. H. Lawrence. Lastly, it will consider working-class mobilisation during the 1926 General Strike as captured by contemporary female writers.

1. Death, Disaster and Domesticity in Audrey Machon Grayson's *The Wheels Turn* (2005) and Barry Vardy's *Creswell and its Mine* (1998)

Memoir and creative non-fiction became a popular means of capturing coal mining memories concerning death, disaster and domesticity in the late 20th century and beyond as the industry declined and communities were transformed. This is evidenced by the works produced by working-class writers who started documenting their memories and self-publishing the results, such as Audrey Machon Grayson and Barry Vardy. It is unsurprising since memoir is an extension of oral storytelling; these authors write as they speak and share stories that have been handed down within their communities for generations. Memory works as a vessel for working-class narratives and is unavoidable since their present is adorned with fixtures of the past, both physically, with the shells of coal mining infrastructure (headstocks, miner's welfares, model villages etc.) forming their settings, and figuratively, with the families who never moved away providing the characters. Sherry Lee Linkon says it best when discussing working-class writing about economic restructuring:

> They tell each other stories about the way things used to be and how they've changed. These stories create and maintain social relationships, but they also function as cultural interpretations that explain and evaluate what happened and the way things are in the present.[5]

Although Linkon's focus is on deindustrialisation in North American industries, striking parallels can be made with the British coalfields across the pond when it comes to how working-class identities are questioned and documented from within. Some historians are quick to dismiss this means of storytelling as 'Smokestack Nostalgia', but as Linkon argues, it is less so an obsession with the past (nostalgia) and more wrestling with the contrast between memory (social value) and loss (status, wages, jobs).[6] However, it is worth bearing in mind that although work rooted in memory is less likely to give an accurate historical account (some experiences can be exaggerated while other realities are forgotten or overlooked), memoir remains useful in creating a sociological picture of working-class life in early 20th Century coal mining

[5] Sherry Lee Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialisation: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018) p. 4

[6] 'Smokestack Nostalgia' is a historiographical term used in reference to the romanticisation of heavy industry by ex-industrial workers and their communities, regardless of how dangerous and destructive it was in reality.

communities, as it is often the most direct link to the people who experienced it and their identities.

In her novel *The Wheels Turn*, Grayson details the childhood experiences of a girl growing up in a mining community. Although the book was published in 2005, it details fictional events that occurred throughout its protagonist's life, spanning from her adolescence into adulthood, providing an in-depth look into the experiences commonly faced by girls and young women from pit towns in the early-mid 20th century. Sadly, one such common experience was mining disasters, with three occurring at the same site at different times throughout the course of the novel. This is not an unusual or exaggerated occurrence in the history of coal mining; for example, Markham Colliery in Chesterfield, Derbyshire, suffered three major disasters in 1937, 1938 and 1973. The 'Walking Together' Mining Memorial by artist Stephen Broadbent, commissioned by Derbyshire County Council, was unveiled at the former colliery site in 2023 to commemorate the miners lost to the disasters, with family members and descendants in attendance, demonstrating the long-lasting effect of these traumatic events upon their local communities.

Similarly, the creative non-fiction novel *Creswell and its Mine* by Barry Vardy details the conflict between forgetting and remembering trauma in the context of coal mining-related events that occurred in a pit village over the course of a hundred years. The dramatised events of the novel climax with a real tragedy that occurred in Creswell, Nottinghamshire, in 1950, resulting in one of the worst pit disasters post-nationalisation that claimed eighty lives. Written in documentary format, the novel uses the focal character John Saul as an anecdotal mouthpiece; this is typical of works in the niche genre of mining disaster literature, as demonstrated with Muriel Rukeyser's poetic sequence *The Book of the Dead* (1938), written in response to the Hawks Nest Tunnel Disaster that occurred in West Virginia over a five-year period from 1930-35. Rukeyser employs salvaging strategies in seeking to reclaim the lost objects and experiences of exploited miners.[7] She achieves this by mapping the sequence as a journey, starting with the first poem, 'The Road', which alludes to the American Dream with the 'car' driving the narrative and its headlights indicating 'future of road'; the commanding 'you' situates the reader in the driver's seat as the miners seeking work.[8] The sequence is political; it is about remembering the lives lost to the disaster (mostly black working-class

[7] Bryn Tales, 'Salvaging the Symbol in Muriel Rukeyser's The Book of the Dead' in *Comparative Critical Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017) p. 323

[8] Muriel Rukeyser., 'The Book of the Dead' in Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser, ed. by Anne Herzog and Janet Kaufman (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005)

miners) and holding those responsible to account. While Vardy's novel is also concerned with remembrance, its tone is more reflective and mournful than angry. Little space is given to the contemporary trauma of the 1984-5 strike and deindustrialisation (Creswell Colliery was closed in 1991 and the book was published in 1998), though it is clear that the novel was written as a means of processing that trauma on both a personal and collective level. Protagonist John Saul's anecdote ends in 1950, some forty-two years before the pit eventually closed, but its documentation of the disaster serves to remind readers of how the community came together in hard times, perhaps in an attempt to salvage what the author feels has been lost in the traumatic decade leading up to the novel's publication, as North Nottinghamshire coal mining communities were, and remain to be, some of the most divided regarding the strike.

This section aims to demonstrate how far the female domestic experience was shaped by death and disaster in coal-mining communities, and how memoir and creative non-fiction texts are effectively used as salvaging tools for working-class writers whilst simultaneously defending them from accusations of 'Smokestack Nostalgia'. It will do so, firstly, by considering how the female characters are depicted as being haunted by their trauma, but also as haunting figures themselves. Secondly, it will examine the different ways in which the texts present women as victims of disaster. Finally, it will demonstrate the lasting impact of disasters upon pit communities and the generational trauma inherited by women, starting with the young female characters in the texts.

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[9] Fig 1, 'Walking Together' Mining Memorial at Markham Vale by Stephen Broadbent.

Interestingly, both texts use literal and metaphorical ghosts as manifestations of trauma, as is a common attribute of coal mining literature, demonstrated by poets such as Helen Mort and Ian McMillan. In the case of the former, ghosts are symbolic of her community's suspension in time and perhaps reflect the generational and/or gendered guilt associated with the opening up of new opportunities at the expense of industry and community. This is a theme that runs throughout her debut collection *Division Street* (2013), in poems such as 'Fur', which features snow as a ghostly presence, haunting 'long-abandoned' spaces associated with masculinity and industry in an ex-pit village.[10] Differently, in Vardy's novel, they symbolise moving on and provide a melancholic sense of hope for the future. At the end of the novel, the narrator is revealed to be an apparition who ascends into the sky after fulfilling his purpose of retelling his family's story. The difference between the ghosts in Mort and Vardy's work is that in the former, they are observed, and in the latter, they are engaged with. Mort's speaker is a mouthpiece for the generation raised in the aftermath of deindustrialisation; her ghosts are images that seemingly cannot be interacted with, reflecting the disconnect between the generations and their lived experiences, whereas Vardy tells the reader what he wants via John Saul's interactions with the young boys. The ghost is eager to teach the new generation about the pit because "No one will even remember that it existed in twenty years' time, and that all the lives in the village were dependent on that area where the mine once stood"[11]. This concluding sentiment harks back to an earlier one uttered by Saul's daughter Ellen when she says, "I wonder if they'll remember us in ten thousand years' time."[12] Although the ghost in Vardy's novel is male, it is Ellen's absence, despite this reference to her previous line, that is haunting as it implies that her memory has already been abandoned, unlike the men's. Her musing is inspired by the cave people that used to inhabit Creswell Crags in prehistoric times, a place that lingers on the outskirts of the village, whose story is better preserved than its industrial history. Although this is not discussed in the book, it is significant that a female character takes an interest in the prehistoric heritage of her home village, given its strong connection to feminine spirituality, with the local legend of Mother Grundy and the recently

[10] Helen Mort, *Division Street* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2013) p. 10
[11] Barry Vardy, *Creswell and its Mine* (London: Minerva Press, 1998) p.227
[12] Ibid., p.26

identified apotropaic marks (or 'witch marks') in some of the caves.[13] Space is, however, given to female spirituality when Saul mentions his wife's "black rosary beads [that are] over a hundred years old, and her family believed that they had great healing powers."[14] Given his wife's Catholic Irish upbringing, it can be assumed that rosary beads were not an overly common item possessed by miner's wives in the largely methodist East Midlands Coalfield, however, their mention does hint towards the importance of tradition and faith in households that were haunted by tragedy.

Grayson's ghosts are different from those of other writers in that they are not known to the reader, but manifest in characters who are haunted and haunting. In *The Wheels Turn*, protagonist Annie's story starts with the trauma of losing multiple family members, including her father, to a pit disaster that happened in her village and how that altered the family dynamic within the household. It offers a unique insight into a pit house that homed three generations of working-class women in the early-mid twentieth century, particularly the disaster's effect upon the mother who was left to care for her own mother while raising a daughter, upkeeping the house, and working additional jobs to make ends meet. Annie confesses her frustration towards her mother, who 'seemed to live in a little world of her own' and had become 'oblivious to [her] existence', compared to the memories of her father that 'lingered' as she claims that he would be much more 'interested'.[15] The language used in reference to her parents here is interesting as it presents them both as ghost-like, existing between realms. Her mother's obliviousness suggests a disconnect from reality as her mind occupies an alternative space away from her trauma, perhaps as a coping mechanism that reduces her physical form to a shadow of its former self. Her father is dead, but the verb 'lingered' suggests a slow reluctance to disappear completely, or rather a reluctance on her part to accept his death. This unwillingness to let go could be framed as evidence of 'Smokestack Nostalgia' as it is a commonly identified attribute; however, it is less a reluctance and more an inability, since the character is constantly reminded of her loss in her father's absence. It is evident that both the younger generations in the household are haunted by their trauma; meanwhile, Annie's grandmother contributes to it. Annie details her abuse at the hands of her grandmother, and the strain that it inflicts upon her mother, going as far as to admit that she hopes that 'Hitler bombs

[13] Mother Grundy's Parlour is the name of a cave at Creswell Crags. It takes its name from a local folklore legend about a medicine woman who was allegedly banished from the village and took up residence in the cave. In 2019, Hayley Clark and Ed Waters of Subterranea Britannica identified markings in Robin Hood's Cave as apotropaic marks (protection marks used to ward off evil spirits).
[14] Barry Vardy, *Creswell and its Mine* (London, Minerva Press, 1998) p. 49
[15] Audrey Machon Grayson, *The Wheels Turn* (Sheffield: Pickard Communication, 2005) p. 27

her' during a documented air raid.[16] This imagined scenario emphasises her negative attitude towards the older woman. Interestingly, the woman who is closer to death in age is also the furthest removed from it, yet her death is wished for by other females in the household. Meanwhile, Annie's paternal grandmother is portrayed as a much more caring figure, despite having lost her husband and two sons to the disaster. The juxtaposition between the two women is best encapsulated by the scene in which the women are gathered waiting to hear news about their men, and a seven-year-old Annie nestles into 'Grandma Clayton's warm breast' before 'Grandma Pointer whisked [her] from [her] lovely warm spot and [they] trudged back to [their] house'.[17] This depletion of warmth as she is taken from an otherwise cold environment feels as though she is retreating into a tomb rather than a home. It is also significant that Grandma Clayton is the first to pass away, while Grandma Pointer survives much longer, to the point where she wishes for death. In this sense, Grandma Pointer is herself a haunted/haunting presence in the novel. Little to nothing is revealed about the source of her bitterness, but when her death eventually arrives, Annie 'felt great relief' that her mother was 'free of her'.[18]

In both texts, the women are depicted as liminal beings that exist in the space between life and death. In his essay *The Uncanny* (1919), Freud uses language relating to the home when discussing the female body – echoes of which can be heard throughout the texts.[19] When death infiltrates this space made for living, it seems to act as an infection that spreads throughout the female home and body and makes it uncanny. The feminine sphere is entrenched in life; the female body itself gives life, and then the home becomes an extension of the womb, with every room serving a different role in sustaining the lives of its inhabitants (the kitchen for sustenance, the bedroom for rest, the bathroom for hygiene and a whole room dedicated to 'living'). In contemporary horror, womb-like settings are often used as venues for the monster/s to terrorise their victim/s. Barbara Creed explains it as such: "[…] The womb is represented in the horror film in at least two main ways: symbolically in terms of intra-uterine settings and literally in relation to the female body."[20] It is interesting that, although the named texts are not of the horror genre, they subconsciously utilise these tropes to invoke a sense of abject terror by situating haunted women in haunted spaces to emphasise the consequences of trauma upon the female coal mining experience. Since women are unable to escape their own bodies, both in the literal and the abject sense, they are condemned to haunt the dwellings that are essentially

[16] Ibid., p. 26
[17] Audrey Machon Grayson, The Wheels Turn (Sheffield: Pickard Communication, 2005) p. 5
[18] Ibid., p. 73
[19] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003)
[20] Barbara Creed, The Monstrous-feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis (New York: Routledge, 2007), p.53.

extensions of themselves and their trauma; their bodies and the structures they inhabit are fixtures of a past they are unable to escape, and perhaps also unwilling to, not because of 'Smokestack Nostalgia', but because their entire identities and sense of worth are upheld by its walls.

Women as Victims of Disaster

In both novels, but most notably in *Creswell and its Mine*, a lot of space is given to the immediate impact of pit disasters upon working-class women. After the men who are directly involved in the disaster, their wives are arguably the biggest victims as their lives are disrupted and altered forever by loss, just as their identities and self-worth were later shaken by deindustrialisation. While this section will focus on Vardy, it should be noted that there is a mutual understanding of this between the texts, and many parallels can be made due to this, which helps not only with understanding how death and disaster impacted domestic life for working-class women in coal mining communities but also why they are unable to release their trauma to this day.

In her essay on maternal grief, Denise Riley discusses the experience of living 'life poised in acute suspension' following the loss of a child.[21] She demonstrates this in her poetic sequence 'A Part Song' in section xvii when time is paused, resulting in a frozen image of a suspended 'sloping gull' and a 'glassy sea' that creates an uncanny world to force the reader into the shoes of the griever.[22] This suspension is presented in Vardy's novel through multiple mentions of food in the scenes documenting the disaster, as with the line, "Several wives were not aware of the accident; they were at home cooking their husbands' breakfast".[23] As with Riley, this scene takes a comforting image and turns it uncanny to capture the time-halting impact of grief. As Litza Williams explains it, "Grief meets the uncanny when the world around you, that was once totally comfortable and familiar, now suddenly feels uncertain, unfamiliar, and creates a sense of fear or dread."[24] Food is significant as it embodies this comfort and familiarity, and ties the male and female mining experience together in a number of ways; it is what the men work for and what the women prepare, and it also symbolises domesticity and the sustainment of life in general. The preparation of food is interrupted by news of death and

[21] Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without its Flow* (London: Picador, 2019) p.20.
[22] Denise Riley, *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016) p. 13
[23] Barry Vardy, *Creswell and its Mine* (London, Minerva Press, 1998) p. 219
[24] Litza Williams., 'The Uncanny Nature of Grief', https://whatsyourgrief.com/the-uncanny-nature-of-grief/

disaster and is thus symbolic of this suspension and defamiliarisation within the home, particularly since the meal is breakfast – a time indicative of new beginnings. Bleakly, it also serves as an immediate reminder that food might become harder to obtain for the family. Vardy also makes female anguish known through the reactions to news of the disaster. Most notably, he mentions that "A young widow collapsed into the arms of a priest and a policeman".[25] The verb 'collapsed' is evidence of the strong, physical reaction that grief can have upon the body. It is a compelling lexical choice as, rather than using a traditionally feminine word, such as 'fainted' or 'swooned', the word 'collapsed' has industrial connotations, insinuating that the women are also fixtures of industry and thus direct victims of the disaster. The choice to specifically identify the widow's saviours as a priest and policeman hints at the direction her life might now take without her husband. As previously mentioned, feminine spirituality seems to play a significant role in the domestic sphere, as evidenced earlier in the text, so the priest's support could hint at the feminine reliance on faith for comfort, but the inclusion of the policeman could also indicate a swaying towards security and more tangible support due to faith being shaken in the wake of disaster. The latter would be unsurprising, considering the general divergence from religion that occurred within Britain from the outset of the First World War onwards, thus further displacing working-class female identities within the domestic sphere.[26]

An interesting note to make about the difference between the novels' portrayals of female victimhood is that elsewhere in Vardy's novel, female trauma is expressed through male trauma and is depicted as a contributor to it, despite the true villains being patriarchy and capitalism (ironically, both masculine creations). Linkon draws attention to the notion of displaced blame by white working-class men upon others by stating: "Many place the blame not on capitalism, but on other workers – immigrants, women, people of colour – who seem to have benefited, or at least not been hurt as much, by a changing economy".[27] It is unsurprising, then, that this manifests in a story about working-class male suffering written from a working-class male perspective. Although the men are presented as victims, a case for female victimhood can be made through the ways in which they are presented as the victimisers. This is particularly evident in the section of the novel that tackles the 1929 General Strike. The family becomes

[25] Barry Vardy, *Creswell and its Mine* (London, Minerva Press, 1998) p. 221
[26] My undergraduate thesis argues that religious disenchantment began during the war and extended into the interwar years, altering British people's attitudes towards religion from then on, using the literature of Graham Greene to evidence this.
[27] Sherry Lee Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialisation: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018) p.3

reliant on soup kitchens, which John describes as 'degrading' and 'demoralising'[28]. Such adjectives are not surprising in this context, since this change of circumstance can be regarded as a gendered failing given the expectations men place upon themselves to be breadwinners and provide for their families. Mary contributes to his feelings of vulnerability when she says, "I always 'oped my family wouldn't 'ave ter go through that". It is through John's inability to provide as a breadwinner that Mary is less able to provide as a mother, which is why she could be interpreted as blaming her husband for the situation they are in. However, the use of the pronoun 'my' suggests that she is, in fact, sharing the blame. John also talks of the 'great pressure' on men from their wives and children to go back to work.[29] This comment appears to place the blame on women but suggests that this pressure was unspoken, given the mention of children. It is more likely that the pressure came from within the men due to the situations their families were in, which suggests that their suffering was great enough to cause this conflict of interest for the striking men. It is difficult for the male characters to acknowledge this internal pressure because it would mean acknowledging fault with the foundations that provide them with a purpose, without which their identities and sense of worth would waver, as deindustrialisation would later serve to prove.

Despite being told from a male perspective, Vardy's account provides sufficient insight into the domestic lives of working-class women as impacted by death and disaster. It is through masculine perspectives that one is able to understand how male suffering defamiliarised the home and rendered these comforting feminine infrastructures uncanny, thus leading to a displaced sense of identity for the women whose bodies were extensions of these spaces. These homes are still inhabited by working-class families, many of which are inherited by generation after generation, meaning that the relics (objects, people, stories) that reside within them serve as constant reminders of a past that has lingered long into the present. The impact of death and disaster, and the inherited trauma that is passed down the generations as a result, is evidenced in the prevalence of annual remembrance services and recent projects such as the 'Walking Together' memorial.[30] Such events are kept alive not due to a nostalgic unwillingness to let go of trauma and the industrial past, but due to the working-class stories influenced by the ever-present past that continue to be shared within their communities.

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[28] Barry Vardy, *Creswell and its Mine* (London, Minerva Press, 1998) p.140
[29] Barry Vardy, *Creswell and its Mine* (London, Minerva Press, 1998) p. 144
[30] Creswell with Elmton Parish Council hosts an annual remembrance service at the 1950 colliery disaster memorials in the Skinner Street Cemetery and St. Mary Magdelene's Church on the anniversary in September.

Generational Trauma: The Wheels Keep on Turning

'Eldest Daughter Syndrome' is the unofficial term for the burden faced by oldest daughters who are given responsibilities that are not age-appropriate; a phenomenon that appears in both novels. According to Unicef, data shows that the disproportionate burden of domestic work begins early, with young girls spending thirty percent more time on chores than boys, which only increases with age.[31] Of course, this is not unique to mining communities but it is prominent within them. Deindustrialisation opened up new possibilities for women, but it also condemned working women to carry out a disproportionate amount of domestic chores alongside their careers, forcing them to share that burden with their children, namely their eldest daughters. Although there are many contributing factors and unique circumstances that contribute towards young girls taking on adult burdens within their families, the trauma of deindustrialisation is inarguably a large one.

Annie briefly retreats into a life that is not dominated by the pit but her later marriage to a miner thrusts her back into that lifestyle. History repeats itself when her husband is badly injured in a pit disaster like their own fathers had been. The significance of the novel's title is made clear here, with the turning wheels acting as a metaphor for this repetition, though ironically, those wheels would one day stop turning but their ghosts remain present, making any resolution of this trauma near impossible. It is also about the mundanity of life for women in mining households and the constant cycle of chores, as demonstrated by Annie when she says, "My life just seemed one endless round of housework, food, and school".[32] Thirdly, it also serves as a metaphor for the generational trauma stemming from this time that continues to be passed down from mother to daughter. In the novel, the burden is placed upon Annie when she loses her father to the first disaster, the consequences of which manifest later when experiencing the loss of her son to another disaster. In her grief, she regresses to childhood as a coping mechanism, which is made apparent in the line, "I felt like a little girl again and was so grateful [mother] was looking after me."[33] It is likely that the similarities between the disasters transported her mentally back to the time of the first when she was a young girl overburdened with adult responsibilities, but this time she is able to share the burden with her mother and daughters, allowing her to grieve as she was not able to then. Unfortunately, this

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[31] Unicef Press Release., 'Girls spend 160 million more hours than boys doing household chores everyday', https://www.unicef.org/turkiye/en/node/2311#:~:text=The%20data%20show%20that%20the,chores%20than%20boys%20their%20age.
[32] Audrey Machon Grayson, *The Wheels Turn* (Sheffield: Pickard Communication, 2005) p. 78
[33] Ibid., p. 64

also means that she inflicts upon her daughters the same age-inappropriate responsibilities that once overburdened her in childhood. She describes them "like little mothers fussing around the little ones and doing all they could to ease my pain."[34] The simile, 'like little mothers', is a blatant example of the expectations placed upon young girls in mining households as a result of generational trauma and domestic norms. The girls innately adopt the role of mother without instruction because it is ingrained in their culture; it is an instinct that will be inherited by their daughters for generations to come.

Similarly, Eldest Daughter Syndrome is present In *Creswell and Its Mine*, where the conditioning of young girls for motherhood is made abundantly clear throughout. However, Vardy's depiction of girlhood differs from Grayson's in that at times, the novel reads more like an instruction manual for motherhood rather than presenting these instincts as innate. This is evident in moments such as Mary's (John's wife) childbirth, when she tells Ellen "One day it'll be your turn […] It's always better when it's over".[35] Although the line is spoken 'softly', the language is commanding. Her daughter is given no choice in the matter, with the contraction 'it'll' meaning 'it will' sounding very definite. It is also as if Ellen is in training to become a housewife when she is seen "helping to make the family meals and clean the house" while her mother cares for her sick brother.[36] The verb 'helping' implies that she is not carrying all of the burden, but depicts her as an apprentice of sorts, practicing the roles she is expected to carry out in later life. Or alternatively, it could suggest that it is the mother who requires the additional help due to her own shortcomings, since blame is often subtly placed upon Mary when things go wrong in the house. It is implied that due to her involvement with the Mother's Union during one of the documented strikes in the novel, which "gave her a small break from her family" and "allowed her to catch up with the village gossip", her eldest daughter Margaret had to step up and become a "second mother to all the younger girls in the house".[37] The first lines quoted unfairly suggest that female interest in politics is purely selfish and superficial (this is also made clear earlier in the novel when Mary is mansplained to and patronised for taking an interest in 'masculine' topics).[38] The gap in pages between the two instances makes them appear unrelated, but it is seemingly the accumulation of Mary's external interests that supposedly pulls her away from the home and leaves the burden of raising the younger

[34] Audrey Machon Grayson, *The Wheels Turn* (Sheffield: Pickard Communication, 2005) p. 67
[35]Barry Vardy, *Creswell and its Mine* (London, Minerva Press, 1998) p.59
[36] Ibid., p. 49
[37] Ibid., p. 114 and 117
[38] Ibid., p. 102 – 'Mansplaining' is the feminist concept used in reference to a conversational technique executed (predominantly) by cis-gendered men towards women in which something is explained in a condescending way.

daughters on Margaret. Once again, Linkon should be heeded here in that the blame is being unfairly placed upon women for seemingly abandoning their duties to adopt more masculine roles within their communities, rather than questioning the circumstances that are driving the women out of the domestic sphere in the pursuit of political change.

It is crucial to note the difference in the writers' genders and the perspectives from which their stories are told. It is not surprising that a story written from the perspective of a miner's daughter, wife and mother, situates motherhood as a collective effort while one written from a male perspective regards it more as a burden to learn and inherit rather than to share. In either case, little attention is given to the generational consequences of inherited trauma, perhaps because that is how it always had been and how they thought it always would be. Depending on one's views, deindustrialisation can be regarded as an event that opened up new opportunities for women outside the household, or as a greater strain on working-class women from post-industrial communities who are still expected to maintain their traditional domestic duties alongside their careers. Either way, this leads to an unfair displacement of blame upon women for supposedly 'suffering less' than working-class men at the hands of deindustrialisation. This, in turn, influences how memories are documented and shared within coal mining communities. It explains how female experiences are remembered and how this impacts attitudes towards working-class women today.

In the prologue and epilogue of *Creswell and Its Mine* which take place in 1998, John Saul is concerned with educating two young boys who had recently moved into the village about its history in relation to the mine. The boys represent the reader and John is Vardy, retelling the story to a new generation that came to the village following pit closures. The importance of remembrance is made clear in the novel's final sentence uttered by the boys when they promise John, "We will remember."[39] Remembrance is not about preserving trauma or reflecting an inability/unwillingness to move on; it is about collectively healing and documenting history so that it is not buried and forgotten, but also reflects an inability to escape the trauma of deindustrialisation that still exists in the present. The title is an apostrophe away from meaning something very different, but its sentiment is actually very similar: this story belongs to Creswell and it is Creswell's to share. Therefore, accusations of memoir and creative nonfiction as 'Smokestack Nostalgia' are unfair given that these communities know better than anyone the impact of death and disaster upon domestic life and the ongoing devastation caused by

[39] Barry Vardy, *Creswell and its Mine* (London, Minerva Press, 1998) p. 229

deindustrialisation. Furthermore, Linkon describes deindustrialisation as a 'half-life', in that is not a past event, but an active and significant part of the present. In Linkon's analogy, deindustrialisation manifests as a disease, leading to consequences such as alcoholism, drug addiction and high suicide rates, but also as a psychological disease, as communities struggle with questions about their identities and their place in a global economy that has devalued workers and their labour.[40] As this essay demonstrates, the purpose of working-class storytelling is not to preserve trauma, but to use memory as a vessel to create and maintain social relationships bound by a shared sense of identity and loss, and also to make sense of a present that is so tightly bound to its past. In doing so, an authentic, if not statistically informative, account of the female working-class experience is provided by these works as they lack self-consciousness due to being written for the communities they reside within.

[40] Sherry Lee Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialisation: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018) pp. 2-3.

2. A Love Affair with Landscape: Female Sexuality and Self-Dissolution in *Sons and Lovers* (1913) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) by D. H. Lawrence

In his novels *Sons and Lovers* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, D.H. Lawrence explores female sexuality in industrial settings by testing the tension between domestic and natural landscapes. In both texts, the female protagonists escape their domestic restraints by dissolving into nature. The process of female/non-male self-dissolution as a cultivated means of survival, as it is defined by Elvia Wilk, typically sees non-male characters succumb to nature and escape through death.[41] The term used in reference to this theme, 'Death by Landscape', derives from Margaret Atwood's definitive short story of the same name, in which a young girl disappears in the woods during a camping trip. The story is told from the memory of the girl's ageing best friend, who becomes obsessed with landscape paintings, believing she can glimpse her missing friend existing as a tree within the artwork. The moment that the girl succumbs to nature is neither explicit nor drawn out, pinpointed only by her startled scream that echoes throughout the feminist and queer ecology literature and criticism inspired by or written in response to the story since its publication.[42] However, Lawrence's characters are unique in the genre in that their bodies succumb to landscape not through death, but through sex. Still, in a sense, sex, or more specifically, the orgasm, is a temporary death. The French word for orgasm 'le petite mort' directly translates to 'the little death'. The feminization of the adverb 'petite' despite the masculine 'mort' is an unusual grammatical pairing, which makes the term all the more interesting, as it suggests a feminine slip into the masculine realm of death; as if women are liminal beings able to fluidly traverse different landscapes and realms, whereas men exist in more permanent states.

Lawrence's depiction of female sexual liberation sets his work apart from his more conservative contemporaries. Furthermore, this centralization of female characters actively rebels against the 'system novel' standard, which Wilk defines as a story about a white male protagonist and his experiences against a greater system; a system that is never fully revealed or understood by the central character/s, with a focus on macrolevel occurrences and interconnectedness, providing a lens through which the human experience is meant to be extrapolated. In her own words:

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[41] Elvia Wilk, 'Toward a Theory of the New Weird', (2019).
[42] Margaret Atwood, *Death by Landscape*, (1989).

> The systems in which he [the protagonist] is embroiled are social, technical, and political, rather than ecological, suggesting a separation between the human realm (system) and the natural world (ecosystem). In books about systems, men tend to emerge from the background rather than merge into it.[43]

Lawrence and his contemporaries were writing at a time when landscapes – natural, social, political, etc. – were rapidly changing due to macrolevel occurrences such as war and the rise of heavy industry. Lawrence is unique in that his works not only place women at the centre – his female protagonists emerge from the human realm and merge into the natural world as a means of escape. It is no surprise that Lawrence rebels against the system novel and situates women and nature at the centre of his pieces given that his condemnations of the impact of heavy industry upon the landscape are well documented, as evidenced in the following reflection on his hometown Eastwood:

> To me it seemed, and still seems, an extremely beautiful countryside […] To me, as a child and a young man, it was still the old England of the forest and the agricultural past; there were no motor-cars, the mines were, in a sense, an accident in the landscape, and Robin Hood and his merry men were not very far away.[44]

Here, he regards his hometown through the nostalgic gaze of his childhood self. It is interesting to compare this romantic, fantastical description of the Nottinghamshire countryside with that of modern writers from the same region, who, like Lawrence, yearn for what is lost, but whose losses are the 'accidents' denounced in the extract. It is no secret either that Lawrence's attitudes towards the masculine and the feminine were influenced by his parental relationships with his mother and father, which thus influenced his attitude towards the changing landscape. Despite Lawrence being the son of a miner, his stories concern the surface, with the (masculine) pits remaining in the background, and the (feminine) domestic and natural landscapes at the forefront. Another way in which the Lawrence texts differ from the 'system novel' is that there is no 'separation' between the human and natural realms as the social, technical, and political impact upon the ecological is made clear through female perspectives and their desire to divorce from the 'system' and marry into the ecosystem. This process of self-dissolution occurs

[43] Wilk, p. 13.
[44] David Amos and Natalie Braber, *Coal in the Blood*, p.16.

in three main – though not necessarily linear – stages: the female body is uncanny; the female body submits to the landscape as a means of escape; the female mind dissolves into the landscape and becomes free in its unfreedom. This essay will explore these stages in detail, firstly, it will draw on Michael Marder's theory of Plant-Thinking to examine the process and effects of female self-dissolution; secondly, it will demonstrate the relevance of 'Death by Landscape' in the female sexual relationship with nature; lastly, it will consider the home as an extension of the female body through the lens of the weird and the eerie. In doing so, a case will be made supporting the stance that Lawrence's depiction of the female love affair with nature is reflective of his urge to escape industrial settings that were shared by females in the domestic sphere.

Plant-Thinking

In his study into plant thinking, Michael Marder acknowledges plants as symbols of 'unfreedom' due to their being rooted to the earth and dictated by the sun and seasons, but argues that plants are free in that they are not weighed down by human domains such as philosophy and religion and are therefore unexposed to the anxieties provoked by such concepts. Women of the 'old working-class', as defined by cultural theorists such as James E. Cronin, are therefore plant-like in that they are not constrained by their class identity and actively seek to escape it.[45] The female characters in D. H. Lawrence's work are often seen to find refuge in nature, as in *Sons and Lovers,* when, following a domestic altercation with her husband, Mrs Morel abandons the home and retreats into the garden. A close reading of the following scene provides a wealth of evidence depicting Mrs Morel's dissolution into the landscape as a means of escape:

> Mrs Morel leaned on the garden gate, looking out, and she lost herself awhile. She did not know what she thought. Except for a slight feeling of sickness, and her consciousness in the child, herself melted out like scent into the shiny, pale air. After a time the child, too, melted with her in the mixing-pot of moonlight, and she rested with the hills and lilies and houses, all swum together in a kind of swoon.[46]

[45] Pamela Ann Fox states that traditional masculinist historicism "conceives of [the] 'old' working class as a homogenous, public, organized unit of resistance and casts women as the central agent of recuperation", using James E. Cronin's theories for reference, p.21.
[46] D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, p.39.

The verb ‘leaned’ suggests that there is some dependency on domestic life that prevents her from straying far beyond the home and highlights her physical condition (being pregnant) as the course of this dependency. It is significant that the ‘garden gate’ is what offers her this support, as it is a liminal fixture that separates the indoors from the outdoors, the private from the public, the masculine from the feminine. It is notable, however, that despite this dependency, she is ‘looking out’ beyond the garden, indicating a desire to escape. She is described as having ‘lost herself awhile’ and ‘did not know what she thought’, suggesting that the process of self-dissolution is starting to take place. Like plants, she is rooted in place due to her home, family life and gender, but allows herself to become unrooted in this moment by dissolving into nature. Lawrence even repeatedly uses the verb ‘melted’, a synonym for dissolved, that contributes towards an extended metaphor that culminates with the phrase ‘the mixing-pot of moonlight’. The presence of the moon is significant since associations have been drawn between the lunar and menstrual cycles, as is the metaphorical ‘mixing pot’ that refers to a domestic utensil associated with female roles within the home. It is a stimulating lexical choice since it is close to the term ‘melting-pot’, which is often associated with conversations about politics and history – both traditionally masculine topics.[47] Furthermore, ‘melting pot’, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, is often used to reference a place where different people and ideas exist together, often mixing and producing something new.[48] The feminization of this term, therefore, implies that a process is taking place, whereby the female mind and body are becoming one with the landscape. This is furthered by the choice to punctuate the listed ‘hills and lilies and houses’ with ‘and’ instead of commas to situate them all as equals and to blur the lines between the indoors and outdoors, the human and plant. The triad is described as having ‘swum together in a kind of swoon’, with the sibilance extending the semantic idea of melting to exhibit the result of this self-dissolution. The verb ‘swum’ has liquid connotations, but also indicates navigational capabilities, suggesting that this new landscape/state of being is traversable and therefore not a negative.

This scene is significant because it sets the tone for the literature that followed later in the 20th century and beyond. The garden fence is a recurring image in texts depicting death by domesticity, including *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) by Jeffrey Eugenides and *The Neglected*

[47] A 1987 study by Winnifred B. Cutler et al. into the Lunar Influences on the Reproductive Cycle in Women concluded that there is a relationship between the changing phases of the moon and the propensity for menstrual onset in women, p. 965.

Garden (1991) by Kathe Koja, in which female characters impale themselves on garden fences to escape their domestic restraints. Morgan Jerkins, writing about the former, argues that this traditional symbol of suburbia as an instrument of death suggests succumbing to the expectations it represents.[49] However, Wilk's interpretation of impalement as implantation is more befitting here, as it suggests that to plant oneself in a seemingly passive, self-destructive gesture is to protest domestic expectations of the female body through noncompliance.[50]

Lawrence's own sense of relations between plants and people is a theme that recurs throughout his poetry and prose. Zhong and Chen identify three types of flower symbolism in Lawrence's writing: the 'flower' as a symbol of family, the 'flower' as a symbol of freedom, and the 'flower' as a symbol of growth and change.[51] In the cases of Lady Chatterley and Mrs Morel, their dissolution does not end in literal death, but in the marrying of the female mind with nature and its divorce from domesticity.

La Petite Mort by Landscape

Lawrence's female characters are different from others in the genre in that they give their bodies to the landscape, not through death, but through sex. To return to the previous extract from *Sons and Lovers*, Mrs Morel is almost seen entering into a romantic relationship with the landscape through the process of self-dissolution. The verb 'swoon', as used in the aforementioned triad 'swum together in a kind of swoon', has feminine connotations but here detracts from the emotional influence of men upon women in heteronormative situations. Traditionally, 'swoon' is used romantically, and/or in relation to fainting from extreme emotion. Here, it resituates landscape as the cause and salve of extreme emotion, replacing the male presence to dispel the anger that arose in the domestic dispute.

This relationship between the female body and landscape is made more explicit in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* through Connie's affair with the gamekeeper, whose name (Mellors) literally means "The settlement set amidst the wild and uncultivated mountain tops".[52] Her love affair is not, therefore, with Oliver Mellors, but with the landscape itself. She differs from Mrs Morel in status, though both characters undergo social de-mobility through their sexual pursuits. In a sense, Mrs Morel is a reflection of Connie's future once she escapes upper-class

[49]Morgan Jerkins, 'Reading Bored White Girls', (2026).
[50] Wilk, 'Toward a Theory of the New Weird', (2019).
[51] Quingxian Chen and Xuanxuan Zhong, 'Interpreting the Symbolism of Flowers in Sons and Lovers by David Herbert Lawrence', p. 265.

life, though it is more apt to suggest that the process of self-dissolution sees both women abandon class entirely. Although Connie does not directly embody working-class female identity in the British coalfields, she reflects the common feminine urge to escape unhomely environments by succumbing to nature.

In one sexual encounter with Mellors, Connie is, at first, unable to climax due to the 'peculiar haste of his possession' reminding her too much of what it is she is trying to escape through her physical intimacy with him.[53] But when he makes to leave, she begs him to stay 'not even knowing what she said' and clings to him with 'uncanny force', wanting to be saved from herself and the 'inward resistance that possessed her'. [54] Lawrence directly likens sex to death in this scene, opening with the simile "She yielded with a quiver that was like death". His penetration is an uncanny experience for her that is described as 'strange and terrible', with this foreign object in her body being likened to a 'sword in her soft open belly'. At first, the experience invokes abject horror within her but "once the terror subsided in her breast […] She dared to let go of everything, all herself, and begone in the flood." [55] The ensuing sensation is detailed in a way that one might depict the process of dying, with the simile: "She was like the sea, nothing but dark waves rising and heating, heaving with a great swell, so that slowly her whole darkness was in motion, and she was ocean rolling its dark, dumb mass." This semantic field of water links back to the proposed idea that women are liminal beings able to move fluidly between different realms of existence, while the repeated image of darkness suggests that the realm of female pleasure is uncanny and unfamiliar to her. The scene climaxes in an orgasm, marked by the line, "She was, she was not, and she was born: a woman", suggesting that her old self died at that moment to be born again.

A queer ecological reading of Lawrence might interpret this as the writer's own love affair with his countryside and a psycho-critical take might argue that the focus on female sexuality could be evidence of an Oedipus complex, given his dissatisfaction with the masculine world of heavy industry and tenuous relationship with his father, contrasted with his romantic documentation of the countryside and his closeness to his mother. Regardless of the author's conscious or subconscious intent, the temporary death of the female body as a result of self-dissolution into the landscape is a clear reflection of a feminine urge to emerge from the human realm and escape into the natural.

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[53] D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 171.
[54] Ibid., p. 173.
[55] Ibid., p. 173.

The Female Body from Uncanny to Eerie

The ecological uncanny, as Rebecca Giggs explains it, is the experience of ourselves as foreign bodies.[56] Certainly, there is evidence of such present in both texts when female bodies and spaces are infiltrated by masculine fixtures and become unhomely, whether through pregnancy, foreign objects within the home, or industrial changes to the landscape. Through the process of dissolution, these bodies that begin as uncanny undergo a transformation that sees them become eerie. The Eerie differs from the uncanny because, as Mark Fisher argues, Freud reduces the uncanny to a threat to the white man's sexual supremacy (castration anxiety) by focusing on elements of the home or the domestic that are unnerving and strange but the weird and the eerie 'allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside'.[57] In the transition from uncanny to eerie, the female characters become acquainted with the parts of themselves that were once unfamiliar to carve a new existence free of their domestic restraints and to take up residency in spaces where men cannot reach.

Both Mrs Morel and Connie marry into worlds that are unfamiliar to them, in terms of class, homelife, and landscape. At first, Lawrence uses both women to depict a feminine sexual fascination with the mine, with Mrs Morel seeking out her future collier husband at a dance and Connie initially regarding the mine and the colliers as mysterious. The latter repeatedly refers to them as such; it's almost like the mine represents the mystery of her own body, her own sexual desire, her own femininity, and these men are alluring to her because they have entered that feminine space and reside within it in ways that her husband cannot, as evidenced in the following extract:

> On the low dark ceiling of cloud at night red blotches burned and quavered, dappling and swelling and contracting like burns that give pain. It was the furnaces. At first they fascinated Connie with a sort of horror: she felt she was living underground. Then she got used to them. And in the morning it rained.[58]

The verb choices 'quavered', 'dappling', 'swelling' and 'contracting' all have phallic connotations, while the noun 'furnace' could act as a metaphor for female sexual desire. But once she becomes accustomed to its presence, this desire becomes dull – implying her attitude

[56] Rebecca Giggs, 'Rise of the Edge: New Thresholds of the Ecological Uncanny' (2010) p. 3.
[57] Mark Fisher, *The weird and the Eerie: Beyond the Unheimlich*, p.14.
[58] Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 14.

towards sex. This directly contrasts a later scene following her sexual union with Mellors in which she "ran home in the twilight [when] the world seemed a dream; The trees in the park seemed bulging and surging at anchor on a tide, and the heave of the slope to the house was alive."[59] Again, the verbs 'bulging' and 'surging' have phallic connotations, directly mirroring the earlier scene, though here the metaphor has been feminised, stepping away from the masculine world of industry and entering into an eerie space where the passive becomes active. The melodic cadence of the sentence, reinforced by the assonantal phrase-endings of 'tide' and 'alive', adds to this dream-like image.

Similarly, in *Sons and Lovers*, there is mention of the home as an uncanny space as it hosts furniture that has yet to be paid for. If we think of the home as an extension of the female body, this then becomes a violation. It also becomes an uncanny space when the spouses argue, but Mrs Morel is able to sever the phantom umbilical cord that binds them through the process of self-dissolution. Following the scene where she finds refuge in nature, she returns to the house to find herself locked out, while her husband is asleep at the kitchen table. It is as if she has two wombs and two infants – one she has dissolved with and another she has divorced from. She becomes transcendentally exterior, able to perceive herself from an outside space (literally and figuratively) that allows her to come to this realisation and detach from him completely.[60]

Both women succumb to landscape in different ways but the result is the same; the passive becomes active and a transformation occurs in which women familiarise themselves with the spaces within themselves that were once defamiliarised. In documenting this process, Lawrence too is able to reacquaint himself with what he feels is being lost to industrialisation.

The work of D.H. Lawrence has been praised for confronting social and economic problems as they are embodied in the most private experiences; home, family and sexuality.[61] Although the overarching topics are typical of the 'system' novel, *Sons and Lovers* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* are unique in that they situate women and nature at the forefront, with the collieries providing the backdrop to female exploration and navigation of the landscapes the women inhabit. Although the protagonists are not perfect examples of the working-class female experience (both come from privileged backgrounds), they offer a glimpse into early 20th-century female sexual identities from an alternative working-class male perspective.

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[59] Ibid., p. 178.

[60] Mark Fisher defines weirdness as an 'outside' space that 'lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience'. Not empirically exterior; transcendentally exterior, p.14.

[61] D. H. Lawrence and the Culture of Industry (dir. Paul Allitt, et al.).

It is important to remember that writing about women in this way was not typical for its time. However, we can look to Lawrence as a reliable source, given that the themes covered in both novels are still explored by writers discussing the non-male experience over a hundred years on. He is also a product of the East Midlands coalfield; his texts are therefore vital in piecing together the poetics of female identity in this region, at a time when so few coalfield women were documenting their experiences and when other male contemporaries might have been less sympathetic to the female struggle. His depiction of the female love affair with nature is coloured by traditional Mother Earth connections that see women as 'natural creatures'. Even though his female characters are not always working-class, they are united by an innate femininity that is rooted in landscape and impacted by the transition from rural to industrial. In testing the tension between domestic and natural landscapes by detailing the process and effects of self-dissolution from exterior perspectives, a greater understanding of the urge to escape industrial settings can be found.

3. Working-Class Women from Coalmining Communities as Depicted in Literature about the 1926 General Strike

In literature written by men about the General Strike of 1926, perceptions of women as ignorant contributors to the struggle are made clear. This is evident in texts such as *Creswell and its Mine* by Barry Vardy and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence, whose depictions of the working-class female experience of coal mining have been explored in greater detail elsewhere in this chapter. While these examples are useful in their depictions of how working-class women were perceived by their male counterparts during this time, they are still reflections of the authors' own personal bias and do not offer an accurate or detailed representation of the experiences of every woman. Although it is difficult to find writing by women about the female coal mining experience from the early 20th century, there does exist literature written by working-class women about the General Strike and the turbulence around it. In fact, the two novels from the interwar period that deal directly with the strike, *Clash* (1929) by Ellen Wilkinson and *None Turn Back* (1936) by Storm Jameson, were written by women, albeit the former was not from a coal mining background, and the latter was not working-class.

Feinstein describes Jameson's protagonist as fighting a battle through committees, letters, and signatures to be cajoled out of the famous.[62] This is reflective of a class and status denied to working-class female writers, for whom the competing demands of work, family and home (what the politician Hannah Mitchell described as having 'to work with one hand tied behind us') have meant that, historically, female novelists from a working-class background have been few and far between.[63] This makes Wilkinson, Jameson, and other contemporary working-class writers, such as Ethel Carnie Holdsworth, crucial to understanding the working-class female experience during and surrounding the General Strike, since although they were not writing from the perspective of the female coal mining experience, they offer an alternative depiction of these women that comes from a place of solidarity, rather than bitterness.

In a Marxist reading of Ellen Wilkinson's *Clash* and the feminisation of the General Strike in 1926, Ian Haywood refers to the strike as "a catastrophe that nevertheless demonstrated, however briefly, a revolutionary potential for working-class control over history."[64] If that is the case, then in writing about their experiences, working-class women were taking control of their own history and their futures. This essay will use Haywood's framework to explore the

[62] Elaine Feinstein in the introduction to None Turn Back by Storm Jameson, p. vii.
[63] Nicola Wilson in the introduction to This Slavery by Ethel Carnie Holdsworth, p. xiii.
[64] Ian Haywood, 'Never Again?': Ellen Wilkinson's Clash and the Feminization of the General Strike, p. 34.

emancipation of working-class women, the feminisation of the strike and the emasculation of men, as depicted in literature written about the General Strike, with a focus on work written by female authors. In doing so, it will evidence the impact of political upheaval upon the working-class female coal mining experience and provide an additional perspective to further our understanding of how these women were regarded by their contemporaries in the early-mid 20th Century.

Female Emancipation and Feminising the Strike

The General Strike of 1926 occupies a space in time between two key phases of female emancipation: 1918 (vote for female property owners over thirty) and 1928 (universal female suffrage). In the final instalment of her *The Mirror in Darkness* trilogy, Storm Jameson situates her protagonist, Hervey Russell, in the midst of the General Strike, because she deemed it her duty as an author to write about the events, due to her own socialist sympathies. Meanwhile, for working-class female authors who wrote about the General Strike and the emancipation of working-class women, writing was their own emancipation.

In a review of two of the first books on the Strike, Wilkinson stated, 'we are making history and writing about it as quickly as we make it'. Haywood suggests that, for Wilkinson, *Clash* was an attempt to represent the Strike as a nexus of the twin determining forces of class and gender and believes that her 'feminisation' of the strike, by keeping the working-class female experience central to the text, is an effort to validate women's historical agency within non-revolutionary socialist politics. He further claims that she refrains from openly criticising the patriarchal organisation of the labour movement.[65] As we will see later in the essay, Wilkinson represents female participation in the public sphere as flawed by its bourgeois origins and instead promotes reconciliation with the ongoing struggle of the working class. For Wilkinson, the feminisation of her own experience deepens in the period her protagonist spends aiding miners' wives in their relief work following the strike, in which the novel situates the working-class female experience as the quintessence of alienation and class-consciousness.[66]

Despite this, Wilkinson and her female contemporaries have been criticised for mixing politics and romance – an apparent inheritance from bourgeois fiction writers. Ethel Carnie Holdsworth was another victim, whose *This Slavery* (1925) was condemned for losing sight of

[65] Ibid., p. 35.
[66] Ibid., p. 40.

the revolutionary significance of poverty, due to its central romance.[67] This is an unfair criticism, since working-class women should not have to write solely about their suffering to be deemed relevant. Wilson defends the socialist romance via Pamela Fox, who argues the 'radical potential' of the romance as a complex literary genre that can function as a 'complex resistance strategy, as well as the more obvious re-inscription of a dominant convention governing gender, class and literary relations'.[68]

It is also important to remember that working-class female writers, despite being socially engaged and politically active with a literary platform, were still women who were raised in an era when marriage was a social and financial necessity. Female identities were often dictated by the occupations and economic situations of their fathers, then later, their husbands. It makes sense that romantic love would be a central theme, since it is a social norm, a motivator for political action and a vehicle for revolutionary themes, making the messages more accessible to a popular audience and attractive to publishers. In fact, by entwining romance and politics, these authors offer an honest account of the working-class female experience during the General Strike and the reality for working-class female authors in making their voices heard. This sexual yearning can further be interpreted as the embodiment of female, and indeed, the wider working-class, desire for freedom. As Lawrence's characters escape their realities through sex and succumb to landscape in oftentimes eerie bodily transformations, so too do these female-written heroines occupy a similar liminal space between the public and private spheres. Their sexuality then acts as a vessel between realms, representing sexual agency, female liberation and political emancipation.

Emasculation of Men

Commonly, writing by men from and about this time often depicts working-class women from coal mining communities as unconscious or vindictive contributors to the masculine struggle, whose ignorance, malice and activism contribute to the emasculation of men. Meanwhile, writing by women acknowledges the impact of female activism upon men, but counters the depictions of working-class women as naïve, childlike or as bullies.

The General Strike serves as a backdrop for Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, published two years after the conflict in 1928. The novel's themes of environmental industrialisation,

[67] Wilson, p. xxi.
[68] Ibid., p. xxiii.

class consciousness and social despair are influenced by the setting and political context of this time. Bertha Coutts is the unseen estranged wife of Oliver Mellors from 'Stacks Gate', a fictional industrial village erected with the mine. Her character functions as an obstacle to Mellors' freedom, despite being in a new relationship with a man from her village, who is likely to be a collier or, in some way, connected to the mine. Mellors' depiction of Bertha as a 'bully' who emasculates him through sex creates a negative image of working-class women from coal mining communities. His depiction of these women as products of their environment reflects his criticisms of industrialisation and its impact on the landscape. Mellors, like Lawrence, is a collier's son and in a time of rapid urbanisation, the landscape that saves him from a life underground has become an indicator of high class. If we read Mellors as the fictionalisation of his author, Bertha then represents the industry he's escaping and Connie, the landscape he is escaping into.

This negative depiction of women remains the case in more recent fiction concerning the General Strike, such as Vardy's *Creswell and its Mine*, in which the men are pressured by their wives and children to return to work. Male attitudes towards female involvement in politics are evident when the Mothers' Union is referred to as 'a break from family and chores' and an opportunity 'to catch up with the village gossip' in an effort to belittle the activism of working-class women and to reclaim the narrative as one of masculine struggle.[69]

Meanwhile, female writers do not shy from depicting the effect of female activism upon male emasculation. In fact, as the strike emancipates working-class women in *Clash* and the miners' wives become intellectually mobilised, Wilkinson's protagonist, Joan, begins to feel sorry for the men who are marginalised and emasculated as a result.[70] At times, she even presents the politicised 'simple working women' as openly hostile towards the men in their declarations of independence, in an apparent critique of social mobility and bourgeois culture.[71] Crucially, these women are not vindictive or intellectually inferior to the men, nor does their author depict them as such. Instead, Wilkinson's criticism stems from a desire to keep the working-class struggle central to everything, rather than turning it into a gendered battle against the patriarchy, as influenced by middle-class feminist ideals.

In writing about their experiences, working-class women were taking control of their own histories and futures in a way that is denied to them when they are the objects of masculine

[69] Barry Vardy, *Creswell and its Mine*, p. 114.
[70] Haywood, p. 41.
[71] Ibid., p. 42. 'Simple working women' is a quote from Clash by Ellen Wilkinson, page 239.

perception. Although Lawrence's and Vardy's depictions of women can reveal much about their perceptions of women, which, particularly in the latter's case, was quite typical of men at the time, their accounts are limited to what they can tell us specifically about the female coal mining experience. Having said that, Wilkinson's account is still observational, rather than a firsthand account, and it begs the question: why were working-class women from coal mining communities not recording their own experiences during the General Strike? There are numerous factors contributing to the answer. It is no coincidence that the working-class female writers who were factory workers, since they had not been pushed out of the workforce by the Mines and Collieries Act of 1842. Women from coal mining communities were not as exposed to the same level of political debate and discussion as their husbands. The General Strike changed that, just as the 1984-5 strike would change it again, sixty years later.

Chapter Reflection

Lawrence was famously critical of the impact of coal mining upon the East Midlands landscape. It is a common protestation amongst people from rural areas – even today, we argue against new-build housing estates and associated infrastructure that damages local wildlife. Yet, interestingly, now that nature is scabbing over the scars left by heavy industry, those who might once have complained now yearn for the sight of the headstocks, in the same way that Lawrence yearned for the land of Robin Hood and his Merry Men.[72]

It is easy to understand the allure of landscape when heavy industry came to represent such darkness, as demonstrated in the explored memoirs, and yet the trauma is depicted nostalgically, not in a glorification of this trauma, but because it reunites them with an identity that is receding and reconciles their past with their present. As demonstrated by this chapter, the purpose of working-class storytelling is not to preserve trauma, but to use memory as a vessel to create and maintain social relationships bound by a shared sense of identity and loss, and to make sense of a present bound to its past. Furthermore, as evidenced by the works of early working-class female writers during times of political upheaval, writing was an outlet and political tool, but perhaps most importantly, a means of self-preservation that was later inherited by women from coal mining communities, which will be explored further in the next chapter.

[72] David Amos and Natalie Braber, Coal in the Blood, (2021). P. 16.

The political opportunities that became available to working-class women from coal mining communities because of the General Strike saw them re-enter a space that they had been removed from by the 1842 Mines and Collieries Act. This certainly impacted how they were regarded by men, as evidenced in the analysed texts, as they were often depicted as 'gossips', bad wives and mothers, or as contributors to the masculine struggle. It also impacted how they regarded themselves and how they would go on to capture their experiences in poetic forms. This is something that would repeat six decades later during the 1984-5 strike and its aftermath.

Chapter Two – Poetic Activism and Self-Preservation During the 1984/5 Miners' Strike

Chapter Overview

> In the summer of 2025, workers at Caphouse Colliery in Wakefield went on strike. The start of the strike coincided with my first week working at the National Coal Mining Museum as a casual Visitor Welcome Assistant. On my first shift, I drove through the picket line and was called a 'scab'. Once parked, I made a point of going over to the striking mine guides, engineers and cleaners and accepted the literature they were handing out. As I walked away, I heard one of them say, "That was very respectable of her".

This research project coincided with the 40th anniversary of the Miners' Strike. This event brought a flurry of new television programmes, exhibitions, theatre productions and community projects, and although it was positive to see a surge in conversations about coal mining, it was at times overwhelming. Having embarked on this research in silence, the noise of 2024-5 was hard to tune out. What was relevant and what was not was hard to determine from the outset, so what ensued was an overconsumption of art, media and history. The strike forms a small part of this thesis, but for a while, it took over my life. This was difficult as someone who has lots of personal trauma tied up in the strike, stemming all the way back to that five-year-old girl asking her grandad why he had plates on the wall. It was impossible to ignore, but it was important for me to create space for multiple poetic perspectives, not just what was written by strike supporters.

Unfortunately, the narrative that Nottinghamshire miners are responsible for the strike's failure is still perpetuated by supporters of the strike, with some socialist historians endorsing the belief that working miners were class traitors. Harry Paterson writes:

> Although it has been thirty years since the strike, with countless volumes dedicated to its study, no one has yet satisfactorily explained how a couple thousand Nottinghamshire strikers managed to intimidate over 20,000 working miners.[73]

[73] Harry Paterson, *Look Back in Anger*, (2014). P. 85.

In reality, working miners and their families were often victimised by striking miners and those who supported them. Shirebrook, a village on the Derbyshire-Nottinghamshire border, became known as the most divided in Britain. One week into the strike, the Derbyshire branch of the NUM held a ballot in which half the county's pits decided to strike. Shirebrook miners voted to work but were overruled, leading many to see the strike as undemocratic. Those who broke the strike and returned to work travelled in barred buses wearing crash helmets for protection. Five so-called 'scab' buses were burned, railway tracks were pulled up by strikers and weaponised, and working miners and their families were targeted. One family had their trailer vandalised regularly, and striking miners' wives heckled the mother and her children from their doorsteps. "We didn't want to do it [sic]", says one man in the documentary, "They gave us no choice [sic]".[74]

Ironically, had it not been for the brutality of flying pickets, Nottinghamshire might have looked very different during the strike. Creswell, another village on the border, backed the strikes of 1926, 1972 and 1974, but voted to continue working during the 1984 strike. My grandma, the ex-wife of a working miner, always said: "Our men voted against it because Yorkshire thought they could bully us into striking."

The influx of strike-related content that came with the 40th anniversary commemorations was overwhelming but, at times, surprisingly well-balanced. The '84/85 – The Longest Year' exhibition at the National Coal Mining Museum and the 'Strike 84/85' exhibition at Cardiff Museum are two significant examples. But there is still work to be done locally. The Derbyshire Unemployed Workers Centres toured their commemorative strike exhibition around North East Derbyshire and came to Bolsover Castle in October 2024. Local footfall was incredibly low.

The subjects of the essays in this chapter are an attempt to create space for multiple poetic perspectives to be heard, not just those on either side of the debate, but those who existed adjacent to it. Although the strike was damaging for coal mining communities, some marginalised people benefited from the activism that it sparked. This chapter will explore the complexities of the strike and its impact on coal mining identities, starting with queer representation, rejection and repression as depicted in films representing the strike and its aftermath. It will then consider the poetic activism of female strike supporters as a means of self-preservation. Finally, it will create space for those who supported non-striking miners, closely examining anti-strike poetry and the silence within it.

[74] Miners' Strike 1984: The Battle for Britain (2024, dir. Tom Barrow).

1. Pits and Perverts: LGBTQ+ Representation, Rejection and Repression in Industrial Communities on Film

Throughout this project, it has been interesting to see how different ex-industrial groups receive me as a queer woman researching poetics and identity in the coalfields, depending on which side of the Miners' Strike they fell into. Working and striking miners alike were all fighting to preserve a livelihood and way of life that had shaped their existence for generations. This way of life was not without its social flaws; in many ways, the Miners' Strike and deindustrialisation brought with it new opportunities for women and other marginalised groups to speak up, fight for their rights and break out of their respective spheres. Were it not for the decline of industry, I'd likely be a housewife cooking for my husband instead of writing poetry and a thesis about lost coal mining identities. But that statement is like saying that pit closures were positive for the climate and natural environments, when Margaret Thatcher was no feminist, queer ally or eco-warrior. In fact, her party's policies actively harmed (and continue to harm) all of the above, and if her ban on queer literature in response to the AIDs epidemic had been sustained, then I would currently be neither a miner's wife nor a writer.[75] The environmental and social positives that came from deindustrialisation for marginalised groups were simply minor wins in a major loss – and yet the fight for equality continues.

Perhaps it is a coincidence that the majority of ex-working miners and the females connected to them are more suspicious of my motives than striking ex-miners, who are generally more left-leaning and open-minded. Or perhaps it is in part due to the growth of social movements alongside the industrial struggle in which radical activists from diverse backgrounds coalesced to form a broad social and political movement.[76] The Strike erupted in a decade of second-wave feminism, post-punk anti-capitalism and anti-establishment values, and the continuing fight for civil and LGBTQ+ rights – because of this, the striking miners found allies in unlikely places and were united by a common enemy.[77] The financial and social solidarity of organisations such as Women Against Pit Closures and Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners was vital to the struggle. Since union funds were seized by the courts, the £20,000

[75] Section 28, part of the Local Government Act of 1988, was a reviled clause that banned the discussion of same-sex relationships in schools.

[76] Hilary Wainwright, 'Beyond the Coalfields: The Work of the Miners' Support Groups (1985)' in *The Doreen Massey Reader*, (2018). Pp. 135 – 148.

[77] 1977 Punk explosion. The Brixton Riots 1981. AIDs epidemic. The 1980s brought around greater law attainments for women due to feminist activism, these include the Sex Discrimination Act, the Employment Act, and the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act and the criminalisation of Female Genital Mutilation in 1985.

approx. raised by LGSM for striking miners in Dulais Valley, South Wales, alone paid for a quarter of their bills throughout the dispute.[78]

The story of LGSM had been somewhat overlooked until recently. The release of *Pride* (Matthew Warchus, 2014), which coincided with the Strike's thirtieth anniversary, re-told the story and brought it to new audiences, with an all-star cast and critical acclaim that saw it reach viewers who were otherwise detached from coal mining heritage.[79] The film is bookended by the Pride demonstrations of 1984 and 1985, concluding with a scene where approximately eighty miners march in solidarity with LGSM after initial resistance to accept their help. The moving gesture is seen as the fitting culmination of a movement whose central argument is that support will be reciprocated if solidarity is offered.[80] In between the two demonstrations, space is given to the experiences of queer people, mining communities, queer people within mining communities and the community's reaction to queer people. *Pride* is unique in that LGBTQ+ experiences are equally weighted with those of striking miners, whereas other films in the genre broach the topic of queer lives within (post) industrial communities less explicitly, or allow less room for exploration. *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000), *The Full Monty* (Peter Catteneo, 1997) and *Kes* (Ken Loach, 1970) are such examples where queerness is a theme, yet it is expressed (or repressed) through suggestion and metaphor to reflect the wider reality of queer people living in these communities. Because of this, this essay will focus less on London-based activism and more on the miners, their families and how sexuality is represented and reacted to within their depicted communities on film, to better understand the realities. Through this lens, we see queer people on par with working miners, treated as the enemy both within and around themselves; queerness portrayed as a masculinity crisis in reaction to the shifting gender roles; and queer self-expression as a means of escaping from a dying industry.

The Enemy Within

In *Billy Elliot*, the homophobic slur 'puff' (and other variants) is used as frequently as the term 'scab'. This equates queer people to working miners to imply that neither aligns with the masculine and heteronormative ideals of the time. His dancing to express anger, juxtaposed with the violence of the pickets, can also be equated to 'scab' behaviour in the eyes of striking

[78]Diarmaid Kelliher, 'Solidarity and Sexuality', in *History Workshop Journal*, (2014) p. 242.
[79] The film has grossed £16.7 million to date in the box office and won a BAFTA. It was the 73rd highest grossing film in the British Box Office for 2014 with Billy Elliot Live at 100.
[80] Kelliher, p. 24.

miners, who saw working miners as complicit and fightless. It suggests that queer people, like working miners, were considered 'the enemy within' at a time when homophobia was fuelled by fears of the AIDs epidemic and bolstered by Margaret Thatcher and Section 28. It also goes deeper inward, as queer characters see their sexualities as something to be repressed and hidden, even from themselves. There are multiple repressed characters in the genre who either covertly or overtly undergo a transformation, emerging at the other end as more accepting of themselves and/or others. Interestingly, the characters who are confirmed to be queer exist on the periphery of these narratives, so the exploration of their inner workings is limited or nonexistent. Their revelations are there to be reacted to by other characters, to drive the plot forward, reflect character development, or to face harsh realities.

In *Billy Elliot*, Michael (Stuart Wells) is the only confirmed queer character, who tentatively attempts to determine Billy's sexuality throughout the film and is only fully outed to the audience when his advance is rejected. The fact he made an advance at all is reflective of how entwined sexuality and ballet are in the collective mind of the community, as even for a young gay person in the 1980s industrial north, a ballerino is regarded as effeminate and homosexual, making Billy a safe character to come out to, which disproves criticisms of the film that accuse it of failing to question the feminisation of ballet.[81] Similarly, in *Pride* and *The Full Monty*, the queer characters from within the industrial communities only declare their sexuality to others when it is deemed safe to do so, or once they have been exposed. In the former, Cliff (Bill Nighy) comes out to a knowing Hefina (Emelda Staunton) in a tender moment. It is clear that the pair only feel safe acknowledging this reality once communal opinions have been challenged and changed, or allyships made clear, by the introduction of an external group of queer activists. In the latter film, Lomper (Steve Huison) and Guy (Hugo Speer) quietly begin a relationship once they have been exposed in (and escaped from) a homoerotically suggestive situation infiltrated by the police.

The stereotypical depiction of miners and their attitudes towards queer people is best summarised in *Pride*, when Mark Ashton (Ben Schnetzer) attempts to garner support from his peers and is initially rejected, due to their community's historic abuse at the hands of miners. Indeed, characters such as Johnny (Johnny Gibbon) and Gary (Jack Baggs) and their mother, Maureen (Lisa Palfrey), uphold the stereotype with their open aggression and spite towards the queer activists. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the genre, we see the exploration of the

[81] Jacqui Miller, 'Criss-Cross: Identity and Transformation in Re-reading *Billy Elliot'* in *Journal of British Cinema and Television,* (2016).

microaggressive homophobia that exists behind closed doors, in films such as *The Full Monty*, where Jean (Lesley Sharp) confronts Dave (Mark Addy) about being gay, then relaxes and becomes more accepting of his reality when she learns the truth. Since *Pride* is a film with the queer experience at its centre, it is unsurprising that it takes a more explicit stance on homophobia in industrial communities, whereas the films that exist within those communities are more nuanced in their approach because sexuality is not the central theme. Despite this, films that are explicit or implicit can be just as revealing of the realities of queer people.

Crisis of Masculinity

The Full Monty is almost nonchalant when it comes to queer representation. Two central characters, Lomper and Guy, begin a homosexual relationship during the course of the film, but little attention is given to their storyline – it just simply *is*, just as the heteronormative relationships are. Other than the moment in which the relationship begins, most focus is given to the funeral of Lomper's mother, when the two are seen holding hands by Gaz (Robert Carlyle) and Dave (Mark Addy). This is certainly progressive for characters in a film set in Sheffield, 1997, but when you look beneath the surface, the relationship could be read as a reflection of the film's overarching narrative – one of a crisis of masculinity – suggesting that queerness is a reaction to feelings of de-masculinisation.

The term 'crisis of masculinity' is often used in reference to the anxieties caused by changing relations between the male and female genders and their traditional roles as a result of deindustrialisation. The economic advancement of women is certainly a driving force for these anxieties, given that masculinity is largely centred around the image of the male breadwinner. In 1997, it was reported by Britain's Office for National Statistics that, since the early 1970s, women's economic activity rates had been increasing, reaching 72% by early 1997, whereas men's activity rates declined to 85%.[82] In *The Full Monty*, female encroachment on masculine spaces is highlighted numerous times, in scenes where they are seen desiring sex, going to strip shows and taking on the breadwinner role. One of the most explicit examples of this masculine crisis occurs at the start of the film, when a female character is seen urinating like a man. This causes anxiety for the male characters, because it symbolises both an 'invasion

[82] Statistics by Kelly Farrell 'Naked Nation: The Full Monty, Working-Class Masculinity, and the British Image', in *Sage Journals,* (2003) p.121.

of the masculine space' and 'the appropriation of a masculine bodily performance'.[83] Other films in the genre utilise this symbol, such as *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996), which uses wind instruments to express the same idea. Anxiety is induced for the miners when Gloria Mullins (Tara Fitzgerald) infiltrates their all-male space and is sufficiently able to wield her instrument, again reflecting the blurring of traditional gender roles that rendered men feeling like 'spare parts'. Judi Addelston refers to the 'phallus' in her critical reading of *The Full Monty*, claiming that it is through its reveal with the penultimate striptease that the 'marginalised' men are redeemed and can 'achieve a more centred masculinity'.[84] This explains why the male characters respond to these anxieties by facing them head-on and changing the narrative, and suggests that the homosexual relationship between Lomper and Guy is another example of marginalised characters seeking redemption through exposure.

This crisis of masculinity is evident in *Billy Elliot*, such as when the soup kitchen pushes the ballet dancers (girls) and boxers (boys) into one room together, transforming a masculine space, one of sport and leisure, into a domestic one, then again when Mrs Wilkinson 'steals' Billy from boxing. However, it is different from other films in the genre because its lead character is an adolescent who does not experience the anxieties for himself, but rather, suffers the anxieties placed upon him by others. These anxieties push Billy to flee the constraints of masculine expectations and seek refuge in the feminine, bringing him closer to his deceased mother. This is poignantly demonstrated by his subtle transition from wearing boxing gloves around his neck to replacing them with ballet shoes. Farrell's reading of *The Full Monty* can also help us understand the relationship between Michael and his father. Michael's cross-dressing is both a reaction to male anxiety (like Billy's dancing) and a cause of it, because it is seen as the physical embodiment of the feminine invasion of the masculine space, resulting in the effacing of the male body. Again, this is a commonly explored element in the genre that takes centre stage in films such as *Kinky Boots* (Julian Jarrold, 2005) and *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* (Jonathan Butterell, 2021), and echoes the ongoing battle for trans and nonbinary rights.

Queerness is not an internal reaction to feelings of de-masculinisation, but these anxieties can influence how people, both queer people and cisgendered heterosexuals, respond to queerness. A close examination of films in the post-industrial genre reveals a lot about reactions to queerness in industrial communities, but less about the inner workings of its queer

[83] Ibid., p.20.
[84] Judi Addelston, 'Doing the Full Monty with Dirk and Jane: Using the Phallus to Validate Marginalized Masculinities', in *Sage Journals*, (1999) p.339.

characters, which tells us both very little and speaks volumes about their experiences living in these largely gender normative, regressive environments. The fact that there is mostly no hint or build-up to characters coming out is telling of how safe the characters feel in their own communities and highlights repression as a survival tool that inevitably ends in full frontal exposure or escape.

Escapism

Escape is a common theme amongst films in the genre, both in the literal and metaphorical sense. Characters, queer and heteronormative alike, escape by leaving their post-industrial realities in multiple ways; through upheaval and relocation (usually aiming for London or other cities that are liberal and/or offer work); through nature, art, music, dance, drag, etc, or, more drastically, through death.

Unsurprisingly, material concerning the impact of deindustrialisation on male mental health is scarce. This is due to a combination of the previous limitations of mental health services and social taboos regarding male emotion. Ally Fogg, writing for the *Guardian,* states that in 1981, 4,129 men committed suicide, almost double that of women at 2,466.[85] One study concludes that this significant gap in suicide rates has been consistent in England and Wales since the late nineteenth century, coinciding with the relative decline of industry, though it is important to keep in mind that suicide rates alone do not account for mental health issues that do not result in suicide.[86] Despite being for entertainment purposes and thus exaggerated to an extent, dramatic representations can offer insight into the complexities of male mental health issues that statistics cannot. The films incorporate dark humour when tackling these issues that emphasise male discomfort regarding the topic of mental health by showing an eagerness to deflect using comedy. In Lomper's case (*The Full Monty*), his chosen method is carbon monoxide poisoning using a motor vehicle – a symbol of both industry and masculinity, suggesting that it is the loss of such that drove him to his attempt. In *Brassed Off*, Phil hangs himself from the pithead, wearing his clown costume. Through such a harrowing, yet ironic image, the film makes a clear statement: It was deindustrialisation that pushed him over the

[85] Ally Fogg, 'Britain's Male Suicide Rate is a National Tragedy', *The Guardian*, (2014).
[86]Statistics by David Gunnell and Kyla Thomas in 'Suicide in England and Wales 1861-2007: A Time-Trend Analysis', in *International Journal of Epidemiology,* Vol. 39, No. 6 (2010).

edge. Ultimately, death stands as an attractive escape for men who feel displaced yet have no means of progressing and are thus left suspended in a class defined by what they have lost. As Farrell writes, "the men… do not dream of escape by moving up socially or out geographically; rather, their only fantasy is about escape through death".[87]

However, some male characters do move up and out. Billy Elliot flees the coal industry before it buries him alive, as is metaphorically the case for his brother and father when they are seen entering the cage that drags them below ground upon their return to work. The absence of his mother and the coldness of his brother and father push him towards the feminine to seek what he is missing, as evidenced by his friendship with Mrs Wilkinson, a middle-class character who embodies his social mobilisation. For Billy, ballet is less about self-expression and more about breaking away from generational, working-class expectations and assumptions about masculinity, making it more of a gendered issue rather than one of sexual orientation. His character can even be interpreted as asexual, since we see him shirk both Debbie's (Nicola Blackwell) and Michael's advances, in a strikingly similar way to *Kes*, in which Billy (David Bradley) is only interested in the bird, while other boys are interested in 'birds without feathers', meaning girls. In fiction, the 'Asexual Exile' trope positions asexual characters outside of society by portraying them as loners, inhuman, or adjacent to death, and it is common for these characters to leave their communities at the end of the story.[88]

Billy Elliot's escape to London was, to an extent, made possible by the strike, thus representing the opportunities that opened up to marginalised groups due to deindustrialisation.[89] However, it is not reflective of the reality of young men in industrial communities, whose promise of a job for life was replaced by the dole queue, or of the queer people who remained in their communities. Critic David Alderson also condemns the film for failing to recognise the contributions of gay and lesbian activists.[90] It is a valid criticism because to suggest that queer activism is not reflective of the realities for queer people living in mining communities is to disregard the realities of the queer activists who did live in these communities. [91] However, the film's motive, and those of others like it, is not to politicise sexuality or to tell the story of queer activists, as is the case with *Pride*. The latter film is in a position to talk about the

[87] Farrell, p.128.
[88] Claudie Arseneault 'Death, Stillness and Exile: Three Prongs of Asexual Imagery in Fiction'.
[89] Billy's father relents due to his acceptance of defeat. His support for Billy's ballet career is spurred by his desire for a better future for his son, which grows as the strike nears its end.
[90] Miller, (2016).

contributions made by queer activists because it is a story specifically about queer activists. It still serves as an insight into queer realities in mining communities through reactions to queer people and the emergence of queer characters from within the community, but films like *Billy Elliot*, *The Full Monty* and others offer a more nuanced view of sexuality and how it reacts and responds to masculinity in (post) industrial communities. Through understanding the political and domestic context of the characters, we can understand more about how queer characters react to or are reacted to in these environments and how this reflects the realities of queer people living through deindustrialisation and its impact upon their sense of identity.

2. We Shall Not Be Moved: Poetic Activism as Self-Preservation amongst Female Strike Supporters

Since the Miners' Strike of 1984-5, working-class women have written extensively about coal mining in various forms throughout the decades as a means of reflecting on and reconnecting with their heritage. It is difficult to trace coal mining literature written by working-class women from before the strike, which does not mean that it does not exist, since working-class writing is often lost to attics and old notebooks. However, it does suggest that the strike inspired a greater need for it to be written, read and preserved. Katy Shaw's study on (re)writing the Miners' Strike supports this theory, as it reveals that mining communities were writing on the margins of existing literature to preserve a sense of self-representation and self-definition. She writes:

> This motivation [to write] seems to be part of a wider recuperative strategy in the face of the erasure of life; an attempt to establish a voice which represented a community and a solidarity of feeling.[92]

Female-identifying poets who write about the strike with a particular focus on the strike-supporting females do so to bring forward their perspectives, at a time when female participation in the strike effort is becoming more celebrated. For daughters and granddaughters of the strike, it is an exploration of heritage; a means of reclaiming the sense of identity that has been lost to deindustrialisation. It is due to the poetic activism of the strike-supporting women that this form of self-preservation can continue throughout the decades, because it provided a foundation to build upon. But in focusing on these perspectives, there remains the silencing of the women who supported non-striking miners. Space will be carved out for those women in the following essay, but for now, it should be kept in mind that Shaw's reading of working-class literature only accounts for those who supported the strike, not everyone who was affected by it.

As the granddaughter of a non-striking miner and a non-striking miner's wife, it is difficult to read language written against my family, knowing the trauma that it inflicted, while simultaneously admiring the work and poetry of politically active women during the strike, but that's what makes them 'difficult'. Feminist author Helen Lewis defines 'difficult' in four

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[92] Katy Shaw 'The Authority of Reality: (Re)Writing the Miners' Strike 1984-5' in *Perspectives on Conflict*, (2006) p. 81.

ways: views that are problematic, complicated and conflicted; a struggle in which you must accept the size of the mountain in front of you and start climbing it anyway; a gendered battle on a field built by men for men (the difficulty of womanhood); and as 'not nice', because to be difficult is unladylike and it strays from feminine ideals.[93] Lewis' exploration of feminism provides a generalised account, but it is one within which the female strike supporter can neatly fit. Using Lewis' framework, this essay will explore contemporary poetry written by the women of Easington Colliery and consider how politically active women are remembered in the recently published poetry of Sarah Wimbush. In doing so, it will demonstrate that poetry about the strike was/is not solely used as a political tool, but as a method of self-preservation.

The Struggle

Lewis defines women as a class 'united by common problems as much as we are divided by differences', which in itself is reminiscent of the values shared by the Women Against Pit Closures Movement, as evidenced by the title of Anne Scargill and Betty Cook's collaborative memoir *United by the Struggle* (2020). In it, Anne Scargill recounts her time at Greenham Common as part of her political awakening:

> It was a bitter cold day and a lot of the women were wearing woollies they had knitted themselves. Everybody was singing and dancing. We all held hands and made a circle by the fence. […] I can't say I had a lot in common with most of the women there and I wasn't a big fan of their ways at times, but I admired their togetherness. [94]

At Greenham Common, Scargill stood alongside women from notably different walks of life – middle-class women with different backgrounds, diets and lifestyles, unified by their femininity and their mission. Back in the South Yorkshire coalfield, she would find that she had a lot more in common with the women around her, even those who were not directly linked to the pit through a father, husband or son, as she was. In the introduction to *The Last Coals of Spring* (1985) by the women of Easington Colliery, Heather Wood writes, "My husband does not work at the pit, but as we believe our community will die if the pit closes we felt it our duty to help in some way." Similarly, Betty Cook describes seeing a placard that read 'close a pit,

[93] Helen Lewis, *Difficult Women*, p. 1-5.
[94] Anne Scargill in *United by the Struggle,* p. 121-122.

kill a community': "I came to know that this wasn't just about keeping men in work and fighting against a government that didn't seem to care, it was about where we lived and how we needed to look after it." [95] Strike supporters were not just supporting striking miners; they were fighting for their own ways of living as an act of self-preservation.

Self-preservation was also a motivation for writing poetry. In contemporary poetry written towards the start of the strike, the reader gets a definite sense of the mountain before its writer. In *The Last Coals of Spring*, the poems speak of victory but do not detail what that looks like. Instead, focus is given more to what defeat looks like. The collection opens with 'Easington Colliery, a Place by the Sea' by Ellen Roberts and ends with 'The Mother of our Community' by Samantha Vout (age 12). The poems are in conversation with each other, with the former theorising what will happen and the latter confirming that it is happening

> "Young people will have to move away."
> "Families move away because there is no work."
>
> "What will happen to our village to-day/ No shops, no bus stops."
> "The village becomes deserted like a ghost […] shops and houses boarded up."
>
> "There is a pit here you can see."
> "Pit heads looking gloomy and dark."

This can be interpreted as a warning, something worth fighting against, or as an acceptance of that mountain. In producing the poems for the collection, it is evident that its writers decided to climb it anyway. Although the collection is politically charged and rousing, the tone suggests that it was not compiled to influence the strike, but to capture a moment and preserve it.

In her poem 'Women Behind the Strike', Audrey Sillito writes, "For here's McGregor, the bells will peel / He'll do to Mines what he did to Steel." This expression of the future tense suggests that she believed this would happen, and it is unlikely that she was literally trying to reason with Thatcher with the line, "Come on Maggie you are a woman like me". In fact, the true power in the poem comes from its final stanza, when Sillito names the women behind the strike (supporters), Isabel, Margaret, Marilyn, Marion and Linda, thus changing the meaning of the title by decentring Thatcher (the culprit). In doing so, she has ensured that those names

[95] Betty Cook in *United by the Struggle*, p. 130.

are forever tied to the story of Easington Colliery, even if they are omitted from the history books.

Difficulty of Womanhood

It is unfair to credit the strike entirely with a rise in working-class female activism, though it is undeniable that it helped make it more public. Before the strike, political involvement for Betty Cook (who was not married to a trade unionist) looked like joining a union at Empire Stores, becoming a member of the Labour Party and travelling down to Greenham Common on a bus with female activists, yet she did not consider herself a political campaigner at this point.[96] For Cook and many others, the Women Against Pit Closures Movement was a vehicle which allowed them to traverse the masculine terrain of politics with confidence. Lesley Boulton, who was a key female figure at the Battle of Orgreave, reflects on the attitudes towards women at the start of the strike:

> Initially, the miners were wary of women's involvement in the strike, but we found we could do things they had never expected: address meetings, set up soup kitchens and fundraise. Women became the backbone of the strike.[97]

'Backbone' is a telling choice of metaphor, as it symbolises strength, stability and support. This term was often used against non-striking miners and their supporters, suggesting that their 'lack of a backbone' reflected a lack of resilience. The interpreted implication of this language, therefore, is that, in the general consciousness of strike supporters, politically active women had claimed the space that non-striking miners had vacated.

These unexpected opportunities that opened up to women because of the strike are further outlined in Wimbush's poem 'Women's Support Groups'. It lists all the places women stand, starting at the picket line, to universities, behind microphones, building up to No. 10, to demonstrate their upward mobility as the movement gained momentum. It highlights the resilience of the women who 'stand out in the snow', 'stand up to the dark forces / and to those who break the code', using the purity of snow to depict them as heaven-sent, while the

[96] Cook, p. 123.
[97] Lesley Boulton, in The Guardian (2016).

‘codebreakers’ are likened to something demonic. The poem struggles in and out of a marching rhythm, with some lines adding or skipping beats, perhaps deliberately so to show that the women were working it out as they went. Consistent composure is reserved for the concluding couplets, “They stand beside their husbands / instead of one step behind, / and pull their daughters forward / and stand them in the light”, suggesting that these opportunities were a happy consequence of the strike, enabling women to walk so that their daughters could run.

It should be acknowledged that women entering the masculine sphere of politics further contributed towards the crisis of masculinity, thus reinstating this ‘gendered battlefield’ even amongst allies. It is a common trope in post-industrial media to situate female activism as added pressure to the masculine plight, as seen in *Brassed Off,* where the contrast between the tireless activism of the women and the defeat of the men creates gendered friction between characters. This is depicted in a repeated scene where Harry (Jim Carter) returns home as his wife is leaving to campaign. Wimbush references this in the similarly titled poem, ‘Women Against Pit Closures’, in which the subject of the poem (a miner’s wife at a demonstration in Maltby, South Yorkshire) is likened to a rose. “She blooms […] in the sunshine”, meanwhile, “In the shadows – / her husband / her father / her sons.” This metaphor can be interpreted in multiple ways, with ‘shadows’ symbolising the literal darkness of life below ground, the mental toll of the strike, or perhaps it implies that the men are in the dark about female activism. However, if we are to read it through a ‘crisis of masculinity’ lens, then it suggests that as she ventures beyond the domestic sphere, the men are pushed further into darkness. The Aphrodite reference further supports this reading, since, according to Greek mythology, she was a goddess associated with victory whose femininity might be deemed by some as ‘unladylike’. Furthermore, she was born of Uranus’ castration, offering a direct link to Freudian fears relating to masculinity and loss of control.

Challenging Gender Norms

Lewis writes that, ‘to be difficult is unladylike and it strays from feminine ideals’. Through female activism during the Miners’ Strike, women were not only challenging beliefs and assumptions held by men, but also those held within themselves and each other. In the *Last Coals of Spring*, Heather Wood reflects, “At first, many of the women were quite shy asking people for donations but that soon wore off.” Some women were political in a nonpolitical way, using their preexisting skills to support the strike in traditionally feminine ways. In *United by*

the Struggle, Betty Cook reminisces about when a soup kitchen volunteer told her, "We don't want to be activists, we just want to help out in a way that we know. You keep raising funds and we'll do the cooking."[98] Although these women did not technically stray from feminine ideals, they were using them in uncanny ways, which was undoubtedly a source of discomfort for anyone disapproving of female activism during the strike.

This uncanny melding of the feminine and masculine spheres is present in several poems by Sarah Wimbush. 'Our Lady of the Pit Canteen', for instance, is a poem told from the perspective of the 'lady' with 'you' referring to men/miners. It does not dismiss the suffering of men; in fact, it faces it head-on, detailing the perils of life below ground, the luxuries their labours afford us, the strike and black lung; but the conclusion of "I'll 'ave tha guts fa garters / if them dishes aren't brought back!" is a tongue-in-cheek reminder that her wrath is far worse than anything else they've ever faced. It's about recognising the differences in their struggles, but also acknowledging that it is a shared struggle. She is just as at risk if the pit closes because she will be out of a job, and it is her community that will suffer, too.

Similarly, 'Queen Coal' opens with "These are the women who darn and damn and bide", traditionally feminine techniques used for something not feminine. The speaker later asks the question "What do we think of them / as they raise their linen banners […]" 'We' is a powerful pronoun choice, because it challenges the unconscious bias in all of us. The image of the raised linen banner turns a symbol of comfort into a protest. The women who normally lifted clean sheets to peg on washing lines now lifted them, dirtied with words of defiance. These women are described as 'Coal Queens', 'Pit Brow Lasses' and 'Lionesses', feminine terms that empower the strength of femininity, then 'Celts' and 'Firecrackers'. The plosive sounds and sibilance act as a common thread, highlighting the inherited might as each morphs into the next. Even the lexis is at war with itself, such as when they 'sing' and their 'voice jemmies the roof'. The former sounds more delicate, while the latter means to force open, thus demonstrating this conflict of perception.

The poem foreshadows a later piece in the collection with the line, "Some took a bloody nose, some fought back". The line is a reference to the sinister consequence of straying from feminine ideals and the subsequent normalising of male violence against women in public spaces. In this later piece, titled 'Mounted policeman Canters Towards Lesley Boulton', Wimbush responds to the notorious photograph taken by John Harris during the Battle of Orgreave, in which Boulton (a member of WAPC) is pictured defending herself from a police

[98] Cook, p.133.

baton, whilst trying to help a picket with crushed ribs. The lines in the poem are staccato, like a series of snapshots in quick succession, or a patchy recollection of a moment in time; "Her bead necklace, / the horse's breath, / her arm, raised, / his arm stretched". The lexical choices are carefully considered; the seemingly slight differences in the verbs 'raised' and 'stretched' are actually worlds apart. To raise a hand is to question (like raising a hand in school), or to show solidarity (to raise a fist), or to raise children (motherly connotations). This shows strength and vulnerability, while 'stretched' feels forced, deliberate, a reach; the blow was delivered with intent, a crime against her femininity as much as her politics.

The women who supported the Miners' Strike 1984-5 have been repeatedly referred to as the 'backbone' of the strike, and yet, it is only in recent years that they have truly been celebrated for their efforts. Perhaps this is in part due to the trauma of defeat and the subsequent loss of industry that has delayed these conversations, as it has everything else. It can also be attributed to the crisis of masculinity suffered by men who saw female activists and strike supporters as unconscious contributors to the struggle, as was the case in 1926.

In the preface to *United by the Struggle*, Ian Clayton draws attention to the wealth of literature written about Anne Scargill and Betty Cook by 'well-educated women' and the lack of it by the women themselves. It had apparently taken them so long to document their individual and shared history from their own perspectives, because they're practical activists who believe in 'doing, not dwelling'. This is another reason why, up until the 1984-5 strike, writing by working-class women about the female coal mining experience was limited, and why it takes such upheaval to inspire the production of literature. In writing about their experiences, working-class women, even when driven by political motivations, have preserved a sense of self that can continue to be built upon.

It will be a longer time still before the women who supported working miners have their moment, if it ever comes at all, but for now, we keep chipping away at that coal face.

3. The Daughter of a Scab: Unearthing the Silenced Voices of Those Who Supported Non-Striking Miners

At school she was known

As the daughter of a scab

But to me she was my best friend

- *Rachel Moore*[99]

Poetry written in support of the Miners' Strike greatly outweighs that written against it. In the years since this research began, I have trawled archives and exhausted anthologies in pursuit of poetic voices that share an alternative perspective, and I have found them to be few and far between. There are numerous possible explanations for this scarcity, including an awareness of the potential backlash, an unwillingness to revisit traumatic memories or a total omission of these perspectives from the literature. Even now, as someone who was born after the strike, I keep my poem 'Scabs Wife', (featured in my collection, written from the perspective of a non-striking miner's family), in my back pocket, never daring to read it aloud at an open mic for fear that people might mistake me for an enemy call me a scab, or even physically threaten me. What I have found is that more is said in what is left unsaid.

Through the community engagement work conducted alongside my research (to be explored in Chapter Three), I found that the most effective approach to working with divisive communities is to focus on what unites them. Writers that hold alternative opinions about the strike seem to adopt this tactic. Coalfields historian and ex-NUM Committee member David Amos comes under fire in Harry Paterson's book *Look Back in Anger* (2014) for returning to work at Annesley Colliery in support of the majority vote, despite voting in favour of the strike. Paterson quotes Amos stating that, "You will find people like myself are not […] extreme critics of strikes in general or anti-NUM. One of the main issues in 1984/85 was about how the strike was conducted."[100] Amos went on to collaborate with linguist Natalie Braber to edit a collection of poetry, stories and reflections about life in the coalfields. The resulting book, *Coal*

[99] Rachel Moore in *Coal* (2024), p.30.
[100] Paterson, *Look Back in Anger*, p. 84.

in the Blood: An East Midlands Coal Mining Anthology (2021), has been the compendium of my research. It is a unique collection, motivated by rectifying the omission of the East Midlands from studies and publications about coal mining, without rewriting its history. It is the only anthology I have found so far that offers neutral and alternative perspectives on the strike, thus making it a vital resource for examining poetic responses to the strike from non-striking miners and their supporters. This essay will also feature poems from the recently published *Coal* (2024) anthology, published by The Poetry Business. Although this collection was made in collaboration with the National Coal Mining Museum for England, situated in West Yorkshire, it showcases perspectives from coalfields across the United Kingdom. Although it is not as explicit in sharing alternative perspectives, it is still useful in painting a picture of the realities faced by both striking and non-striking miners, at times, seeming critical of the strike, even if that is not the writer's intent.

In the foreword to *Coal in the Blood*, Mansfield writer Andrew Graves writes, "[…] All sides are represented here, all angles shown, no voice is left out in the rain."[101] The collection is dedicated to sharing a multitude of perspectives, including striking, non-striking, and even ex-police, but the main focus is on what binds them all together. It celebrates community, camaraderie and unity, creating a space for shared mourning, remembrance and reflection in an attempt to move forward while not forgetting the past. This essay will carefully consider what is said, while also reading between the lines to consider what is left unsaid in both collections. It will start by exploring poetry that resituates all miners as victims of the strike, then poetry that depicts the victimisation of family members during the strike and ends with poetry that unites striking and non-striking miners as victims of the same loss. In doing so, alternative poetic perspectives on the strike will come to the forefront. The aim is to create a space for silenced voices, to demonstrate the strike's impact on non-striking miners, their families and their identities.

All Miners as Victims

Some of the most impactful poetry about the strike exists on the periphery. It is poetry that does not take a side, but rather, sides against the conflict. Colin Varnham is one such poet who features multiple times throughout the collection. In 'Picket Season' (whose title is a humorous pun deriving from the phrase 'cricket season', which likens picketing to a sport), the speaker

[101] Andrew Graves in *Coal in the Blood*, p.8.

is situated outside the conflict between 'McGregor's pimps' (the police) and 'Scargill's fold' (striking miners) and boldly concludes the piece with, "Though each side claims victory / There are no winners in the end".[102]

This sentiment is echoed in another poem by Varnham, 'Battle for Survival', which appears later in the collection. Like its predecessor, it is a complicated piece because it is not entirely clear what stance the writer is taking, and it can be read from both, or indeed neither, perspectives. The first two stanzas open with "Brother fights with brother / Miner fights with miner".[103] Writing this out in full instead of shortening to 'miners fight each other' puts them on an equal playing field. It strips them down to their bones, demonstrating the reality of who is fighting, rather than allowing the strike to define them as striking and non-striking miners. The repeated use of the verb 'fights with' is ambiguous – it begs the question, 'are they fighting together or against each other?' which seems to be the crux of the poem. The noun 'brothers' is both literal and symbolic, meaning 'brothers in arms', which contributes to the semantic field of war that runs throughout, with the repeated use of words like 'fight', 'battle' and 'survival', which was language commonly used at the time, particularly in reference to significant events such as the Battle of Orgreave. "There is no 'no man's land'" references the First World War to show the gravitas of the situation for those involved. In this battle, there is no stretch of land separating them from the 'enemy' that lives on their streets and in the same houses. The real enemies are the politicians, but it is those with boots on the ground who suffer the consequences. The image of a 'mighty fist' can be interpreted as an act of aggression, solidarity or both. The fist 'clenched tight' is a symbol of unity, which turned into a misguided punch. Ultimately, Varnham's clever use of symbols and language means that the poem can be read in multiple ways, depending on the reader's stance. Despite this, it seems that the ambiguity is deliberately utilised to highlight the deflection of blame, misdirected anger, and inward fighting that came at one of the greatest costs to communities.

According to the biographies at the close of the book, Varnham was a Notts miner from Kirkby-in-Ashfield. Although his own status during the strike cannot be assumed, the environmental context in which he lived and worked (having been employed at Annesley, just like Amos) offers an indication as to why his work was so critical of the strike as a whole. The poems do not hide behind ambiguity, but rather, use it as a tool to resituate miners (striking and non-striking alike) as victims of the same injustices, rather than as victims of each other.

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[102] Colin Varnum, 'Picket Season' in *Coal in the Blood*, p. 149.
[103] Colin Varnum, 'Battle for Survival' in *Coal in the Blood*, p. 157.

The Victimisation of Families

This essay opens with a short poem by Rachel Moore. In just three lines, Moore sums up the impact of the strike on the families of those who continued to work. It starts as a traditional haiku, with five syllables in the first line and seven in the second, but then breaks tradition by extending to eight in the third. An editor might argue that 'but to me' can be sacrificed to make the line more succinct, but the fact that it is there at all seems like a defiant act of nonconformity. The poet deliberately goes against the grain, just as the speaker does by acknowledging her friend as such, rather than as 'the daughter of a scab', like the rest of the school. This laconic insight into the realities of children during the strike sets the scene for the generational trauma that will be explored later in Chapter Three, particularly what is carried by women, which is an overlooked perspective.

Similarly, in 'Buying a Bike' by Lesley Ingram, the poet depicts the harsh realities of striking miners and, more subtly, the wider impact on those closest to them.[104] The speaker buys a bike from a 'young / newly-wed, on strike'. The description of the bike as 'New, Great Condition, Hardly Used' implies that the seller is giving up a cherished item or has been driven to theft to survive. Either way, the circumstances of the striking miner are made clear in the interaction, swinging from 'desperation' in one stanza to 'dignity' in the next. The speaker ends the poem weeping, but not knowing for whom. The choice of the verb 'weeping', as opposed to 'crying' or any other synonymous word, is interesting, as it etymologically derives from the Old English word "wēpan," meaning "to shed tears" or "to mourn". The only two definite characters in the piece are the speaker and the striking miner, but a third character is implied. The miner's new wife is not physically present, but plays a crucial role. The poem is not explicitly critical nor supportive of the strike. However, the delicate yet deliberate details offer an oblique comment on the realities of striking miners and their loved ones, from a feminine perspective. Whether intentional or not, the poem suggests that the striking miner is not only 'selling his life for a gamble', but hers, too.

The surge in interest in the women who supported the strike, which coincided with the recent 40th anniversary, is a positive step toward telling the story of the strike from all perspectives and commemorating the efforts made by women, which have largely been overlooked. But there is still work to be done to uncover the stories of women who were not

[104] Lesley Ingram, 'Buying a Bike' in *Coal*, p. 20.

politically active during the strike. If miners write on the margins of history, then their wives and daughters write in the condensation that fogs glass, especially those whose stories are not documentary ready. This includes those who were spat at in the street, who were called 'scabs' by their neighbours and classmates, those who left their striking partners and, in a sense, became strike-breakers themselves.

United by Loss

The 'Unity is Strength' section of the *Coal in the Blood* collection is followed by 'Rationalisation and Closures'. In this section, a series of poems and essay excerpts tells the bleak tale of the strike's aftermath and the inevitable pit closures that followed. In the introduction to the section, the editors write, "Many people are surprised that the overall decline from its peak to the last British colliery closing in 2015 took just over 100 years".[105] As the quote suggests, many believed that deindustrialisation was inevitable. Had things played out differently in 1984-5, people on either side of the conflict might have come together in the face of loss, as they had always done in the past, which is a sentiment often explored in poetry written about pit closures.

In the years that followed the strike, the phrase 'Have you heard owt' became commonplace amongst miners in the East Midlands coalfield. This is evidenced by the inclusion of two poems in the collection whose titles are similar variations of the same phrase: 'Ave yu eard owt?' by Reg Guest and 'Have you Heard' by Gary Roe.[106] Like Varnham, Guest's speaker is situated outside of the conflict to make a stance against it, thus resituating all miners as victims of the same injustices. The strike is referenced head-on with, "Scargill or the UDM, / or Thatcher's flaming lot, / Just seem to talk but don't do owt / To try and stop the rot". Scargill and the UDM share a line, whereas Thatcher's lot is kept separate and features an expletive, making clear the negative feelings towards Thatcher, but intentionally not siding with either the NUM or UDM. The only certainty is made clear in the opening stanza, when the speaker says, "We know it's on the cards, / That they'll soon shut all the faces down, / And close up all the yards". The remainder of the poem focuses on what is left unknown, with the phrase 'Not knowing' repeated five times throughout the following stanzas. The repetition reflects the apprehension of the miners left in limbo about their futures. Despite this being a bleak time, the camaraderie

[105] David Amos and Natalie Braber, Coal in the Blood, p. 139.
[106] Reg Guest, 'Ave yu eard owt?' and Gary Roe, 'Have you Heard' in *Coal in the Blood*, pp. 174-175.

is made clear in lines such as, "Not knowing when my mates and me, / are going to hear the call" and "'Ave yu eard owt' is the greeting", which positions the speaker's 'dozens of workmates' in the same boat. This uncertainty is shared by Roe's, but his encompasses the wider community rumour to reflect the impact on mining communities that transcended the miners who worked at the pit. His speaker's hopes are made clear in the final line, "There's one more rumour left that I would like to hear / […] one that says you've got this job for another twenty year".

Next comes the aftermath of the pit closures and the unification of communities under their shared loss. Ferrybridge Blues by Liz McPherson reaches back through history as a poignant reminder of all the losses and sacrifices made for coal, culminating in the death rattle of industry.[107] The speaker does not take one side over the other, but shines an impartial light on all elements ('the picket lines', 'villages stripped, families split') which all miners can relate to, though from a multitude of perspectives. The final stanza is ambiguous; the 'heaving of lungs', and the 'choking [...] rising like a last gasp' is an acknowledgement of the physical price paid by ex-miners who suffered conditions such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and Emphysema. It can also be interpreted as the personification of industry, and indeed, the communities formed around it. The 'last gasp' is singular, but refers to a collective death, thus uniting anyone with a connection to coal with a shared loss.

The careful curation of *Coal in the Blood* and its chronology should not be underestimated. The inclusion of multiple perspectives alone makes a statement, but then ordering them shoulder to shoulder and not separating them clarifies the editors' intention of creating space for all perspectives to be shared without bias. The examined poems, whether consciously or not, help evidence the fact that non-striking miners were not responsible for the breakdown of their communities, but were also victims of this breakdown; they help highlight the detrimental impact of the strike upon the family members of both striking and non-striking miners, even if not in their own words; and they attempt to unify fractured communities under a shared loss. Reframing the strike in this way can help those who supported non-striking miners process the trauma and help younger generations understand their place in the heritage, particularly since they were unable to self-preserve their coal mining identities in the same way as those writing in support of the strike.

[107] Liz McPherson, 'Ferrybridge Blues' in Coal, p. 38.

There is still work to be done to amplify the voices of non-striking miners and their supporters, and it starts with making space for those voices to be heard. *Coal in the Blood* is a model to follow when curating collections about coal mining, as its well-balanced, impartial depiction of alternative perspectives opens up conversations rather than deadening them. Its focus on unity over division also makes the more controversial poems, like 'Union Psalm 43', more digestible.[108] It is the only featured poem that is explicit in its condemnation of the strike and is heavily critical of Arthur Scargill, who is depicted as a 'shepherd' and compared with Moses to exasperate his shortcomings. It ends with the couplet, "I am glad I am British / I am glad I am free / But I wish I was a dog / And Scargill a tree!". The fact that it is marked 'Anon' speaks volumes.

Chapter Reflection

Something that has surprised me, talking to younger people who have no mining connections, is that their understanding of coal mining seems to be synonymous with 1984-85. They know about coal mining because it was the basis of the biggest industrial dispute in recent history – were it not for that, it would be as alien a concept as any other industry to those on the outside looking in. I recently had a meeting for a local heritage project, in which members of the local Civic Society were present. The members were keen to include coal mining in the conversation, as was I, whereas the organisers wanted to move away from it. They said it was too 'political', and it took some back and forth before I realised that they were not talking about the industry of coal mining, but the strike.

It cannot be ignored that the year 1984-5 is synonymous with coalmining history and its impact on the identities of those who lived through it and deindustrialisation, plus those raised in its aftermath, is the main reason this research exists at all. Despite the trauma and lasting tensions that still haunt ex-pit towns forty years on, it is because of the strike and the political climate adjacent to it that we now have access to literature depicting the female and queer coal mining experience, though more work is needed to bring non-striking perspectives to light without fear of reopening old wounds. This chapter has demonstrated the impact of the strike as a motivator for self-preservation through poetry and as a vessel for positive change and opportunities, which has enabled some members of coal mining communities to take pride in their heritage, but crucially, it has identified a need to create space for those who were unable

[108] Anonymous, 'Union Psalm 43' in *Coal in the Blood*, p. 158.

to self-preserve at the time, since it is provenly harder for the descendants of non-striking miners to find themselves in poetry written against them.

As demonstrated by my grandads when I asked them about the commemorative plates on the wall, working-class people who were directly impacted by the strike, particularly those who supported miners who continued working, are not in a hurry to remember. It is a divisive subject, and we live in divisive times; I'm a strong believer in focusing on that which unites us as working-class people from coal mining communities to rebuild what the strike dismantled, but looking to the past to understand the present can help us move forward.

Chapter Three – Reclaiming and Rewriting Identity in the Aftermath of Deindustrialisation

Chapter Overview

> In Creswell, no headstocks are in sight; their absence a reminder of the cost, paid by a life raised in a town defined by loss. 'Post-industrial', 'ex-pit', hanging over it like an exit sign.

I wrote those words after a trip to Amsterdam in early 2024. There, I had stumbled upon a small town where modern industry stood shoulder to shoulder with the famous windmills of yesteryear. At the centre of everything was a chocolate factory, pumping out sweet smells that made me feel as though I was walking the streets of a Roald Dahl novel. It inspired this poetic reflection, questioning why some industries are worth preserving over others and why we were in such a hurry to dismantle our own industrial heritage. It is clear in the poem that the absence of industrial structures and the language that references coal mining communities in the aftermath of deindustrialisation has negatively affected my own sense of self. Without something physical to anchor to, the self-attaches to whatever is definite; in this case, the only thing definite is absence and loss.

This is not something unique to my experience as a woman raised in an ex-mining community. It is a sentiment similarly expressed in James Graham's BBC series *Sherwood* (Lewis Arnold, 2022) – a crime drama in which the murderer is revealed from the get-go, leading viewers, along with the characters, to believe that Scott Rowley's (Adam Hugill) motives are somehow tied to the strike, but in reality, he is seemingly detached from his heritage. Essentially, the plotline is a vessel for delivering the theme of post-industrial trauma in ex-mining communities to a mainstream audience; it is about how the characters react to the events within the context of their environment. In the final episode, one of the titular female characters, Julie Jackson (Lesley Manville), delivers the line, "How the hell are we meant to move on from that when even the way we talk about ourselves is by what we aren't anymore?" It is a single moment that fully captures the essence of this theme and the communities depicted. Pit towns and villages were built to accommodate miners and their families, but are still referred to as such in the wake of deindustrialisation. Interestingly, this line is delivered by a female character; although Julie did not work down the pit, her entire life revolved around her husband's occupation, and so the dynamics of her feminine identity were fundamentally

changed by the strike and the aftermath of pit closures, as was the case with many women within these communities.

Although Julie is not a character who shares this disconnect, she was written by someone born in Kirkby-in-Ashfield in 1982 whose formative experiences occurred during deindustrialisation. The impact is evident in how Graham writes about post-industrial communities. This chapter aims to evidence the impact of inherited trauma upon the identities of working-class people from coal mining communities who are a generation or more removed from the industry. A secondary aim is to reconcile the past with the present to pave the way forward, using participatory arts as a vessel for this reconciliation. Firstly, it will explore the concept of inherited trauma as expressed in post-industrial poetry by Helen Mort and Sarah Whimbush. Secondly, it will examine Andrew McMillan's novel *Pity* (2024), its depiction of queer surveillance in post-industrial settings and the impact of self-subsiding on working-class queer identities. Lastly, it will reflect on the project work conducted alongside this research to determine the impact of community arts upon post-industrial identities.

1. Inherited Darkness: Haunted/Haunting Spaces and Suspended Characters in Post-Industrial Poetry

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is a classic example of poetry that features suspended characters to reflect the trauma of a generation. Published in 1922, the text was written in the aftermath of a traumatic historical event that led to social, economic, and cultural fragmentation. Komal Dabas writes: "The poem shows the effects of the First World War on the world, and how the only escape, according to Eliot, is 'death'."[109] This echoes a sentiment made by Kelly Farrell in a reading of *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, in which she says, "the men […] do not dream of escape by moving up socially or out geographically; rather, their only fantasy is about escape through death."[110] The parallels between these readings help us understand why post-industrial poetry is haunted by the ghost of coal. In a sense, ex-industrial workers are like veterans; similarities can be drawn between the existential anxieties experienced by the Lost Generation and ex-industrial communities. Both were forced to contend with shifting gender spheres, the breakdown of community and rapidly changing landscapes and are defined by what they have lost. Ex-industrial communities are full of people left suspended, as ghosts in the absence of time; they attach themselves to structures and places that anchor them to a sense of identity and belonging. As these places recede, their communities are left uprooted and their people emotionally displaced.

Poets who are products of this displacement are, in a sense, afflicted with a gift that allows them to traverse this spectral terrain. Through their lyrical documentation of these spaces and their reactions to them, we gain unique insight into identities defined by loss, from the perspectives of the speaker and the characters and spaces they interact with. Helen Mort is a key figure in the literature, whose debut collection *Division Street* reacts to the Miners' Strike and pit closures, but crucially, also documents the experience of being raised in the aftermath. The collection has been unfairly criticised for not focusing more on the strike, but its critics have failed to recognise it for what it is: a by-product of deindustrialisation. Even the poems that appear disconnected from the subject are influenced by settings and experiences that are, in some way or another, impacted by it. By this logic, it can be argued that the entire back catalogue of work by any working-class poet from a post-industrial area is a by-product of this loss, but then that throws the research wide open. For this reason, this essay will focus on

[109]Dabas Komal, 'T. S. Eliot's Concept of Time and History in "The Wasteland"' in *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 6 (Jan-March 2018) p. 362.
[110] Kelly Farrell, 'Naked Nation: The Full Monty, Working-Class Masculinity, and the British Image', in *Sage Journals,* (2003) p. 121.

poems from collections that are explicit reflections, including *Division Street* and The Poetry Business's recently published *Coal* anthology, which features various poets.

It is also important to acknowledge that the poems that will be examined are written by women.[111] Despite the scope of this research concerning female identities in industrial settings, this was not a conscious decision when compiling the pieces to feature in this essay. Although haunting/haunted spaces and suspended characters are not exclusive to poetry written by female/non-male writers, the poetry written by male contributors to the explored collections tends to incorporate more concrete images and sensations, even when dealing with memory. In 'Jam Butty' by John Chambers (who has first-hand experience as a collier), the speaker recounts a childhood memory of his grandad returning home from a shift with half a jam butty still in his snap tin.[112] The piece draws on sensory stimuli emitted from the opened tin, including the 'remnant of warmth', the 'hardening bread / bitter crust' and the metallic taste 'like blood in the mouth'. The tangible senses of taste and touch are rooted in this concreteness, whereas the selected poems rely more heavily on sight and sound, as is the case with 'Stone' by Audrey Henderson, in which "A shovel still scrapes when there is no wind".[113]

This examination of the selected pieces will demonstrate the value of poetic inquiry in measuring the traumatic impact of deindustrialisation on people, places, communities and how identities (particularly non-male) are formed around the loss of industry. Firstly, the use of place as a mouthpiece for communities and their collective trauma will be explored; secondly, it will delve into suspended characters and perceptions of the people they represent; and lastly, it will dissect the idea of inherited trauma and its impact on generations otherwise detached from coal mining heritage.

Haunted places

In poetry written about the trauma of coal mining and deindustrialisation, the settings become anthropomorphic and take on the role of characters themselves. This allows the poet to use concrete places as a 'mask' or mouthpiece for the collective trauma felt by their communities. 'Down Pit' by Jane Burn gives flesh and bone to an ex-mining village, then rips it away again.[114] The simile, "watching a village die is like watching / a great bird coming to rest,

[111] All discussed poets use she/her pronouns in the bibliography section of *Coal*.
[112] John Chambers, 'Jam Butty' in *Coal*, p. 53.
[113] Audrey Henderson, 'Stone' in *Coal*, p. 80.
[114] Jane Burn, 'Down Pit' in *Coal,* p. 35.

folding its wings / for the last time. Shedding feathers, parching / naked flesh, becoming bones, becoming ash", is reminiscent of a phoenix, which, instead of being reborn, is left in ashes. Meanwhile, in 'Fur', Mort adopts the same idea, but holds a magnifying glass to it, zooming in on the 'long-abandoned Working Men's Club', where snow fills the 'hollows where bar stools scuffed the floor' and fills 'each empty glass behind the bar'[115]. This haunting image starkly contrasts that of the same club as depicted later in 'Scab', with its conga lines, kissing and Miners' Welfare football team in attendance.[116] This contrasting image makes the emptiness in the former poem concrete and the loss more tangible for readers.

Division Street as a collection is rooted in place, as its title suggests. It is a road trip in which the speaker attempts to escape, but is tailgated by 'home', even when the setting, on the surface, feels detached from coal mining heritage. The poem 'North of Everywhere', with its rural Scottish setting, is (geographically and metaphorically) miles away from the post-industrial South Yorkshire/North Derbyshire landscape that Mort was moulded by, though its fragmented form suggests that her speaker is trying to find the familiar in these otherwise untarnished places. This is also evident in the image of the barn that 'even the ghosts / have left', with its 'sheep spine turning on a string' serving as a reminder of lost industry. Attention is also drawn to the name 'Windhoose' as one 'reduced to nothing but its sound', which is reminiscent of the ex-industrial towns that are defined by what they have lost.[117] Mort's lexical choices, such as the otter that 'mines the water', again demonstrate the speaker's inability (or unwillingness) to mentally detach from a place despite being physically removed from it. In contrast, 'Lowedges' concludes the collection with a return to a more familiar landscape. The personification of the city that 'smooths its skirt down in the name of modesty' suggests that people *are* the landscape here. The recognisable biker who 'lets go of his handlebars and doesn't fall' and the woman who 'rolls the afternoon into a cigarette and smokes it silently' are the structures that remain once the industrial landscapes have gone, carrying the memories and the trauma of the generations that preceded them.[118]

Suspended Characters

[115] Helen Mort, *Division Street*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2013) p. 10-12.
[116] Ibid., p.18.
[117] Ibid., p.7.
[118] Ibid., p. 58.

Post-industrial poetry often draws on traditional ghost stories, using folk forms to capture a lost sense of community. The image of the suspended ex-industrial worker is manifested multiple times throughout the collections. 'Stainless Stephen' by Mort is a poem about masculine identity in the aftermath of the Sheffield steel industry. Stephen's identity *is* steel, with his 'stainless shoes', 'two spoons for a bow tie' and 'A fork / to comb his sleek, black hair'. Without the industry that forged his identity, he is rendered a ghost, haunting 'the chippies' and the 'pub', anchored to a time and a place while life moves without him. Meanwhile, the men in the pub are still 'sweating from the braziers / that vanished thirty years ago / and tug at their collars, / loosening the noose of heat'.[119] While 'noose' has clear connotations of suicide and execution, here it demonstrates the industry's suffocating hold on ex-steel workers. In Mort's poem, the men do not explicitly end their lives, but in occupying these physical and mental venues, they exist in a liminal space between past and present; life and death.

Ghosts exist elsewhere in Mort's collection, manifesting as a dad sifting flour, 'still panning for something' in 'Twenty-Two Words for Snow' and the man who 'dreams of digging his way out' of the bungalow he's lived in for thirty years in 'Fur'.[120] Interestingly, 'Coal' by Julie Sheridan also takes place in winter.[121] It makes sense that the harshest season should feature predominantly in the literature. The coldness amplifies the absence of coal, the resurfacing of traumatic memories surrounding the winter of 1984, and the symbolism of death, defacement and desolation. The story in the poem appears to be processing both a personal loss and a societal one. There are three main characters: the child (the speaker), the father and the snowman, though the latter two can be read as the same, with the latter acting as an anchor for the ghostly father. There are semantics of death in the line, "we rolled his boulder of a body", a phrase that rolls in the mouth and feels quite laborious to read aloud, then again in the line, "I placed him in my ice palace and wept / his loss". Further evidence of the father's spectrality is the absence of speech. The only uttered dialogue comes from the speaker, who says in a commanding, role-reversed moment, "Listen Dad; you can hear the thaw". The temporality of the snowman juxtaposes the permanence of its coal face, which is only mentioned in an oblique moment towards the end, "two eyes and a smile, there on the lawn". This melting of the body questions what happens to our memories once the physical vessels are gone.

One interpretation of these 'ghosts' is that they are literal, in the sense that they represent the men who died for their work. It goes without saying that coal mining was a perilous

[119] Ibid., p.11.
[120] Ibid., p. 2 and p.10.
[121] Julie Sheridan, 'Coal' in *Coa*l, p. 24.

occupation, with the power to shatter workers, families and communities in an instant or over long periods of time. Another interpretation is that the 'ghosts' represent the surviving ex-industrial workers who haunt/are haunted by their surroundings and the social, economic and political ghosts of fragmented identities, searching for something to attach themselves to.

The Haunted

'The Haunted' refers to the 'Third Wave' – those who are one generation removed from coal mining, whose grandfathers worked down the pit, but are too young to remember or have experienced that way of life. The term is used specifically in reference to those who have not benefited from the government-funded Redundant Mineworkers' Payments Scheme.[122] Despite being financially, socially and, in many cases, emotionally detached from their coal mining heritage, this generation has inherited its trauma. It is evident in the lack of employment opportunities, receding accommodation and leisure facilities, upheld feuds with roots in the strike and high suicide rates that only account for a fraction of mental health concerns in ex-industrial communities.[123] It is also evident in the literature written from within and written about ex-coal mining communities.

'Stone' by Audrey Henderson is a poem about the inherited trauma of coal mining and deindustrialisation.[124] It opens with the philosophical question, "Was there any reason not to commit the crime, having been born into the punishment?", which can be interpreted as the speaker questioning the right to pen such a poem, despite being somewhat detached from coal mining.[125] "You inherited darkness" is the anchor of the piece, with the darkness acting as a recurring character throughout, representing both the literal darkness of underground work, but also its absence. It manifests as a physical entity, as in the following excerpt:

> "Darkness that is complete rests on your face, the darkness would squeeze the breath out of you, the darkness would enter your mouth, it would reach inside of you."

[122] National Coal Board payouts. CISWO offers support for the families of ex-mineworkers and guidance for over 200 coal mining charities.
[123] Statistics show that suicide rates have been ever-increasing since the decline of heavy industry started to speed up.
[124] Audrey Henderson, 'Stone' in *Coal*, p. 80.
[125] In the biography section of the book, Henderson shares that she grew up on the edge of the Lothian Coalfield with friends and family members whose parents worked in the mines.

With each clause, the darkness grows more sinister. The first verb 'rests' lulls the reader into a false sense of security; it seems almost motherly before taking on a more demonic form. Entering through the mouth and reaching inside the body is reminiscent of possession, suggesting that darkness dictates the inheritor, as if the future is predetermined.

The speaker is the poet by her own admission. Henderson courageously breaks the fourth wall to draw attention to the conflict of social mobility. She claims her voice with the declaration, 'I had to write the poem in the pitch dark, because you were in the pitch dark'. There is a hint of self-consciousness in the word 'poem', and in the repetition's attempt to level the occupations of writer and miner, that mirrors the class-consciousness explored by Mort in *Division Street*. For example, in 'Thinspiration Shots' Mort dissects body image and eating disorders in the internet age, thus highlighting the physical repercussions of this inherited trauma. Research into the relation between Anorexia Nervosa and social class, conducted by Lisa McClelland and Arthur Crisp, reveals that the disorder often arises as an 'avoidant response to the conflict between social class-related family values/attitudes and adolescent turbulence within that family'.[126] This turbulence manifests itself throughout the collection, with Mort's speaker expressing discomfort regarding class and social mobility, such as with the image of the untouched Cambridge offer in 'Scab'. Michael James believes that 'Mort's personally unresolved sense of class unease […] [suggests] that we are now becoming, or have become, products of the legacy of the strike' and are constantly worried about which picket lines we might unknowingly cross.[127] By including such topics in the collection, Mort draws attention to the Butterfly Effect of deindustrialisation upon succeeding generations. Essentially, *Division Street* is not just a street name, or a reference to the strike; it is about the social, economic and cultural fragmentation of ex-industrial communities, and also the fragmentation of the self within such settings.

Unlike statistics, poetry can capture emotion and explore its complexities. Poetic inquiry is, therefore, a vital tool when measuring something as abstract as the trauma of deindustrialisation and its impact on post-industrial identities. Quantitative data and statistics can help us identify the correlation between increasing suicide rates and declining employment opportunities, but this reveals a fraction of the story and has limitations. For one, it does not consider mental

[126] Arthur Crisp and Lisa McClelland, *Anorexia Nervosa and Social Class* (London: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2001) p. 150.
[127] Michael James, 'Trading on Strikes: Trade Unions in Steve Ely's 'Ballad of the Scabs' and Helen Mort's 'Scab'' in *Journal of Languages, Texts and Society*, 1 (2017) p. 34.

health conditions that do not result in suicide. Post-industrial poetry is both observational and introspective, allowing us unique insight into the minds of poets, which reveals useful information both about themselves and their communities. The ‘ghosts’ that haunt much of the literature are clear embodiments of trauma caused by the social, economic, and cultural fragmentation of coal mining life, on the mineworkers, their families, their communities, their future generations and on the spaces they occupy/occupied. The fact that these themes are adopted predominantly by female writers is revealing of how this trauma is perceived and projected by women onto the people and spaces in their proximity. It is reflective of an inability to attach themselves to anything concrete due to a lack of tangible memories and experiences of coal mining. Despite this, those who are somewhat detached from their coal mining heritage, whether due to gender or age, have inherited a loss that cannot be touched. The absence becomes something concrete in itself, something from which suspended identities can be anchored to stop their escape into obscurity.

2. Post-Industrial Queer Surveillance, Subsidence and Self-Exposure in *Pity* by Andrew McMillan

The concept of surveillance is common in queer poetry and has been explored from a post-industrial perspective in *Pity*, the recently published novel by poet Andrew McMillan. It derives from the adoption of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon model by Michael Foucault to explain his argument that modern disciplinary societies, including the use of CCTV and data collection, create digital panopticons, making us constantly aware of potential surveillance and thus self-regulating our actions, opinions, and even desires.[128] Kafer and Grinberg explain it from a queer perspective as queer people policing themselves due to the constant, unverifiable possibility of being watched, creating 'docile bodies' through panopticism, a pervasive surveillance leading to internalised discipline.[129] Foucault was writing in 1975, ahead of the internet; now, in the age of social media, when 'surveillance' technologies are accessible to the general public and exist in our back pockets, his argument holds even more relevance. Fears of being 'outed', fears of blackmail and fears for personal safety that branch from the overarching fear of being surveilled then impact how queer people live their lives and how they potentially react to the reality of having been surveilled.

Coal and what it represents is one of the Panopticons of *Pity*, influencing internalised discipline within the queer people nearest to it, or spurring them to react against it. Alex, whose father was a miner, represents the last generation to remember the mines. He lives a closeted life and subsides his queerness as a means of survival in an environment where coal mining values and attitudes towards queerness are upheld. Meanwhile, his son Simon chooses to escape through self-exposure (drag, *OnlyFans*) but finds rebirth in self-excavation that reconnects his industrial heritage with his queer identity. Another Panopticon of *Pity* is the author, unbeknownst to the characters, who is spying on them through CCTV, social media, research, and even their dreams. There is a self-interrogation of the author's right to document, which unfolds throughout this paper as it explores the conflict of identities for queer people from post-industrial backgrounds and the impact of queer surveillance on this.

This essay will assess these methods of repression, expression and interrogation to determine how far queer coal mining identities are impacted by their proximity to coal. By doing so, it will highlight the conflict between working-class industrial and queer identities within individuals who possess both and how this is reconciled in the novel. Firstly, it will

[128] Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, p. 83.
[129] Kafer and Grinberg 'Queer Surveillance' in *Surveillance & Society*, p. 593.

consider the act of self-subsidising (self-repression) as a self-preservation response to perceived surveillance; secondly, it will return to the idea of escapism explored in chapter two to demonstrate exposure as an act of escape; lastly, it will consider the author as surveillant and how writing is, in itself, an act of self-exposure.

Subsiding the self

Pity is layering upon layers of memory, where coal is pushed down and covered with sediment, with each generation a layer further away from what once defined their community. Alex exists between layers – his father's and his son's – each representing a life lost to him because he is an 'accident of geography' like the coal seams beneath him. The academic voice in the novel highlights the irony of the word 'subsidence' as a material condition of the land, but also as a "parable for a people unable to stop themselves from slipping into their own past."[130] Throughout the novel, we see Alex self-subsiding by slipping in and out of memories in reaction to his fear of being exposed; a fear evidenced by his habit of 'looking over his shoulder'.[131] This fear can be interpreted as internalised homophobia and/or safety fears, as further evidenced by him telling Simon and Ryan to be more 'careful', attracting 'attention' by holding hands ahead of a confrontation outside the pub. Clearly, it derives from a formative moment when he and his male friend were caught masturbating at school. The words of his headteacher echo throughout the text, "There are things best done at home. There are things best kept inside".[132] This fear of being exposed and being subjected to the abuse he received from his peers forces him to subside his queerness, so that the side of his persona more commonly accepted in post-industrial communities can protect him.

Alex self-subsides by privatising the public, directly diverging from Simon's publicising of the private. His queerness exists in liminal spaces, like a ghost, haunting the darkness behind his eyes. It manifests in memories of communal masturbation in public spaces, including the family living room and his school. He meets with sexual partners in the shopping centre toilets because the liminality of the space is what keeps the two parts of himself just beyond touching distance. Despite attending Simon's drag show in Sheffield, he cannot bring himself to attend the show at his local, because the city poses as another liminal space away from the Panopticism of Darfield. Instead, he watches through windows, video footage and news

[130] Andrew McMillan, *Pity* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2024) p. 98.
[131] Ibid., p. 169.
[132] Ibid., p. 34.

interviews in his living room. But it is through Alex's acceptance of his son's queer identity that he gradually comes to terms with his own. His house is an extension of Alex, whose deterioration represents the breakdown of the sedimentary layer separating his industrial and queer identities. The novel ends with the following passage:

> "He'd always said that in an old house there was always something needed doing, like painting the Forth Bridge, his mum used to say, something that had slipped or something that had crumbled or come loose, plaster that had settled and cracked, things readjusting themselves. Day by day, inch by inch, Alex thought to himself, the floor he was standing on, this old carpet, this very bit of ground, was not in the same place as it was yesterday. Still, it could be worse."[133]

The need to plaster and paint over the cracks reflects his desire to self-subside, but in concluding that 'it could be worse', Alex is seen to relent slightly by the novel's close, hinting that it is not too late to mine towards the self he has buried.

Exposure as escape

Let us return for a moment to Farrell's argument that men depicted in post-industrial literature and media dream of escape through death.[134] In realities where the fear of exposure is so intense, power comes from redefining the narrative through self-exposure. Exposure then becomes a form of death, in which the exposed is opened up to the genuine risk of being harmed, or accepts the death of their old self and faces a new version of themselves.

In *Billy Elliot*, the lead character escapes through dance, both metaphorically and literally, as it inevitably leads him to London, far away from his industrial upbringing in the North East. As previously explored, although his queerness is never made explicit, Billy can be interpreted as an asexual character. In the film's final moments, we see him take to the stage in an act of total exposure before his brother and father in a final act that untethers him from his old self in their eyes. In Chapter Two, the argument was made that this does not reflect the reality of queer people who did not have the same opportunities for social mobility or geographical escape and so remained in their communities. *Pity* gives us that reality in Simon, who, like Billy, is a

[133] Ibid., p. 170.
[134] Farrell p. 128.

generation removed from coal mining, having never worked underground and was denied that option as a future. Because of this, there is less anchoring him to his industrial heritage and more pushing him to seek escape.

The two key ways in which Simon escapes through exposure are *OnlyFans* and drag. In the case of the former, Simon is excited by the idea of the private being public and having an audience at the end of the phone camera.[135] In the scenes where content is detailed, we see a technologizing of the body, through the overlaying of conversation with house music, the cutting up of the body to avoid identification, the filing away of the raw footage, uploading the edits, sharing with subscribers, different camera views, etc., which can be interpreted as an escape from the physical, human body (i.e. death). This is reminiscent of a poem by Sam Sax, aptly titled 'Surveillance', in which the body is technologized with threads such as, "It's a tragic technology – the body – the camera's aperture – a mouth – the internet feed – undiscerning".[136] 'Aperture', meaning hole or gap, relates to photography, while 'feed' is internet jargon, but also references consumption as a process that is done through the mouth. 'Undiscerning' is defined as 'lacking judgement or taste', with 'taste' being significant because it too relates to the mouth. This indisputable parallel is evidence of surveillance as a common concept in queer literature.

If *OnlyFans* is a relinquishing of the physical self, then, for Simon, drag is a rebirth. On his first date with Ryan, Simon had said, "To get ready, he had to lose himself, and find himself as someone else".[137] Getting into drag is likened to 'putting on a mask'; meanwhile, wiping off the makeup is 'like an excavation' in which he is 'digging back to himself'.[138] This suggests that his drag persona is not his true self, but a means of excavating his true self through exposure, which, despite his experience in the drag scene, is not fully achieved until he embraces his heritage with it. The novel's climactic event is a drag show held at the Working Men's Club, where he parodies Margaret Thatcher. When watching footage of the event, Alex witnesses the moment in which his son rises from the flames:

> "His mouth kept creasing into a smile, his face brighter somehow, as though lit by the gaze of the audience. It was something Alex recognised in him from childhood, before adolescence had extinguished it; A sort of freedom, a lightness, someone purely himself."[139]

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[135] McMillan, *Pity*, p. 82.
[136] Sam Sax., 'Surveillance' in *Bury it* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018) p. 84.
[137] McMillan, Pity, p. 10.
[138] Ibid., p. 52-56 and 63.
[139] Ibid., p. 169.

Despite Simon wanting his father to witness his rebirth, it is only able to happen because it is denied to him. Instead, Alex observes the rebirth through windows, video footage and news reports, making the public private, diverging from Simon's methods of self-exposure. This private recognition of his old self by the only person who could recognise it, when the fear of being perceived by that person is removed, is what makes this self-excavation through exposure a success.

The author as surveillant

In an essay written towards my Master's degree, I first analysed *Bury It* (2018) by Sam Sax when attempting to answer the question of grief and who it belongs to. The same can be asked of trauma relating to deindustrialisation. For someone raised in a post-industrial climate, whose parents and grandparents experienced the sudden disruption of a way of life first-hand, it can be uncomfortable claiming that trauma, just as it can be uncomfortable mourning someone you have never met. In 'Surveillance', Sax alludes to his guilt as a surveillant with the line, 'the camera staring out at me – convicted of spying'.[140] The shift to 'me' can be seen as the speaker empathising with Tyler Clementi (the subject of the poem), and/or a reflection of guilt in writing about him, with the staring camera acting as the speaker's conscience, questioning the right to poeticise another's personal tragedy.[141]

For McMillan, this discomfort is made evident in sections where he writes himself into the novel as the unnamed 'poet' who joins the academics. The poet is described as 'young' with "an accent that seemed as though it had begun here but flowered elsewhere – familiar and yet not at the same time", with the verb 'flowered' suggestive of social mobility. The poet's uncanniness makes the participants wary of him, and Brian expresses feeling bad for him, because he "must only be Simon's age".[142] This is significant because it suggests that he might have been like Simon, had he not escaped into his career, or that Simon might have been like him, if he had been dealt different cards. McMillan is not the son of a miner, and he is privileged to have pursued a career in literature and academia, following in his father's footsteps, but this does not detract from his experiences as a queer person raised in a post-industrial

[140] Sax, 'Surveillance'.
[141] Tyler Turner, 'The Binaries Between Public and Private Grieving in Denise Riley's 'Say Something Back' and Sam Sax's 'Bury It', [Unpublished Master's paper] The University of Sheffield.
[142] McMillan, p. 94.

community.[143] His nervousness evidences the impact of his upbringing, which indicates a reluctant desire to return home and complete this work. It also suggests an awareness of disconnect, which is characterised by the poet's role as surveillant, when Brian feels "the poet over his shoulder, looking down".[144] 'Looking down' is an action that creates an image not dissimilar to a security camera and places the poet in a position of power, which feels condescending. 'Over the shoulder' is also deliberate, as this is what we glance over when we feel observed.

By making these feelings explicit on the page, the poets then become the surveilled in an act of self-exposure. This helps establish trust by reframing the perception of the author as surveillant and situating them as equal to the people they write about by exposing themselves in the same way, whilst acknowledging the responsibility that comes with the position they hold. In the novel, the poet is familiar enough to seem trusting, but unfamiliar enough to open up to, thus becoming a facilitator, or a mouthpiece, rather than a spy.

Dreams run like a coal seam throughout the text, depicting the repetition of the miner's descent into the earth, in which miners are like Sisyphus, pushing a piece of coal up a hill. It is not explicitly clear who the dreams belong to, but it can be read as a collective dream existing in a hive mind, which the characters, the author and the reader all share. The events of the dream remain the same, but the interpretation of the coal changes with each retelling. The coal is repeatedly personified but with different verbs, including 'sighing', 'singing' and 'laughing', which could indicate a melting pot of different perspectives.

McMillan writes mindfully about heavy industry, the impact of deindustrialisation on his community and the lingering consequences of the strike, but the trauma of queer surveillance in post-industrial settings is the novel's true sentiment. *Pity* digs back through layers of sediment to find a common thread that runs through all generations and gives a voice to the voiceless. In writing about the trauma and conflict of marginalised identities in post-industrial settings, a new community is formed, or rather, unearthed, so that others might find it, or find comfort in knowing it exists. This is what makes post-industrial literature, particularly that which explores marginalised experiences and the conflict of identities, so valuable in reconciling the past with the present in order to move forward.

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[143] Andrew McMillan was born in 1988, three years after the strike, one year before Darfield Main Colliery merged with Houghton Main in 1989.
[144] McMillan, p. 95.

3. For Art's Sake: Community Arts as an Outlet for Post-Industrial Identities to Reconcile the Past with the Present

Despite the community arts movement in the UK spanning over half a century, there are few books documenting its history.[145] Community arts projects predominantly occur in low-art engagement settings, such as post-industrial communities and are run for working-class people, sometimes by working-class people. Here, we might return to Shaw's research on working-class literature in which she declares that working-class people write on the margins of their own history.[146] Books that exist about community arts are typically not written by participants or working-class practitioners themselves. Often, the output, unless contributing to a larger collaborative piece, is lost to private attics, storage cupboards in community venues or archives that are inaccessible to the public. While this can help explain the lack of documentation, it then prompts further questions about the purpose of participating in community arts if, unlike the poetic activism written during the strike, it is not strictly an act of self-preservation. Jeffers asks, is it about social change, social justice and inequality, or is it art for art's sake?[147] Ultimately, that depends on the motivations of the organiser, which can often be dictated by the complex requirements of funders, thus influencing a backwards approach to community arts, where the bid is written to meet the needs of the funders rather than those of the community, leading to huge compromises in the motivations of artists and organisations.[148] This is unfortunately commonplace, as organisers do not always have the luxury of working from the grassroots up, due to a national lack of investment in the arts sector.

In 1974, the Arts Council of Great Britain declared that community arts should be recognised and supported with its own funding stream, only for the Thatcher administration to cut this, expecting arts organisations to find commercial income streams, despite no methods of generating revenue.[149] This issue of funding is one that, unfortunately, prevails to this day. Su Braden believes that the short-term, project-based commissions, which reduce community arts to a set of components, fail to engage with the causes of systemic deprivation in the areas where they occur. She advocates for proposals that came from the communities themselves and

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[145] Matarasso, F. (2020). 'Let's use this breathing space wisely.'

[146] Shaw, K. 'The Authority of Reality: (Re)Writing the Miners' Strike 1984-5' in *Perspectives on Conflict*, (2006).

[147] Jeffers, A. 'The Community Arts Movement 1968–1986.' In *Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art: The British Community Arts Movement*. (2017) 35-64.

[148] Community Art and the State: Storming the Citadels (1984), p.49.

[149] Wellesley-Smith, C. (2022). Crafting Resilience: Cultural heritage and community engagement in post-industrial textile communities. p. 27.

that are supported with 'a long-term commitment from them as administrators, and that this commitment necessitates patient year-by-year programming in which communities and artists can grow together'.[150] This can be seen in practice in Bolsover District, where the bulk of this research was conducted. As a district, we are lucky to have multiple arts organisations and ongoing projects with community engagement at the forefront, so the impact of participatory arts on coalmining communities can be determined.

This essay will introduce three main case studies: Junction Arts, the Bolsover District Cultural Corridor and the Blackwell Parish Greater Creative 'Squares' projects. It will diverge from the other papers in this thesis, with less focus on the analysis of literary outputs and more attention given to the delivery of community arts and its impact. It will question the role of the practitioner, explore how community arts can engage participants with industrial heritage, and how reconciling the past with the present can help pave the way forward. In doing so, it aims to emphasise the importance of community arts in ex-industrial communities for rebuilding relationships, reconnecting people with heritage and reclaiming working-class identities.

The Practitioner as Participant

Before going further, the role of the 'practitioner' or facilitator should be questioned and clarified. Lucy Lippard states that every artist should question their presence before launching projects that might be 'intrusive' or 'invasive'.[151] This research project had the potential to be, since it was dealing with traumatic memories and sensitive social circumstances. The practitioner's privilege should also be considered. Grant Kester notes that the side-by-side nature of working with communities does not detract from the privilege the 'artist' infers when working with communities other than their own.[152] In my case, I am working with my own community, but I recognise that my experiences are different because I am a generation removed from coal mining. I also hold a position of power as the timekeeper, the facilitator and the person being financially reimbursed for their time and skills. There is also the assumed social mobility of higher education, which may have had a subconscious impact on how I was received. Whilst I agree that this role should be questioned when conducting research, the role of the working-class practitioner as a participant and benefactor of the art they facilitate should be kept at the forefront.

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[150] Su Braden, *Artists and People*. (1978) p. 123-4.
[151] Lucy Lippard, *Farther Afield: Between Art and Anthropology* (2010), p.32.
[152] Grant Kester, 'Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art' (2004), p. 124 – 151.

Lippard and Kester raise important points, but fail to consider those practitioners who are also working-class community members. It is problematic to draw too heavy a line between practitioners and participants when the practitioners are community members themselves, as it implies that working-class people engaged in participatory arts cannot also assume the role of practitioner because of their social class. This goes against the ethos that art is for everyone by suggesting that arts careers are not, or that working-class artists cannot exist, because social mobility must occur before one can assume the 'artist' title. This devalues the work of creatives who self-define as working-class, and can negatively impact their sense of identity. Unfortunately, it seems to be a common theme amongst academics and national organisations when delivering community engagement projects. For example, English Heritage recently launched a project in collaboration with Torch, an Oxford University initiative, in which academics run poetry workshops at selected sites in 'low art engagement' areas. One site is Bolsover Castle – a site with two long-term creative writing groups and a high number of poets living and working locally. The project has failed to see community members as potential practitioners who can participate through co-creation.

A good example of co-creation with communities is the work of Greater Creative, supported by Platform Thirty1. In 2025, I was invited to creatively evaluate 'Squares', a yarn-based project, in which over 5,000 granny squares were knitted or crocheted by community members and contributed to five yarn Christmas trees, one for each village in Blackwell Parish. I was interviewed by community members and managed by a working subgroup of community members. The project was co-designed with community members from the ground up. Skills were learned and nurtured; some participants were inspired to start their own businesses and received paid commissions and other opportunities to develop their creative careers (me included). This had a profoundly positive impact on the welfare of practitioners who participated in the project and on participants whose creative practice was nurtured by the project. Multiple community members shared their experiences of feeling 'empowered' to seek out new personal and professional opportunities through their involvement with 'Squares'.[153]

For working-class practitioners, working life can become a never-ending job application. The financial insecurity and creative unfulfillment that this brings can have a significant impact on the well-being of working-class creatives. Braden's belief that a long-term commitment to programmes that enable communities and artists to grow together resonates in the Bolsover District, particularly since the two are not mutually exclusive here. It is therefore important not

[153] Appendix, fig. B.

to dismiss the experience of the working-class practitioners or to assume that their position is entirely one of privilege. Instead, by inviting community members who are creative practitioners to participate through co-creation and facilitation opportunities, the legacy of community arts in ex-industrial communities is ensured.

Engaging with Industrial Heritage through Community Arts

A report by the Heritage Alliance identified the unique role of heritage in engaging with and promoting societal and individual well-being, by offering '[…] a sense of rootedness and identity, of place and understanding'.[154] It is more nuanced in the case of coal mining heritage, because it carries with it so much trauma – from the dangers of the occupation, disasters that devastated entire communities, strikes that split families and the trauma of deindustrialisation. There are also very few places people can go to engage with this heritage, since most of the infrastructure has been dismantled, repurposed and built over. Community art serves as a vessel for complicated emotions or an escape from them. It also does not need a physical structure to engage communities with industrial heritage, though tangible objects always help. Instead, it exists in halls, libraries and other community venues. It is not always the art that engages with heritage, but the conversations and connections that are facilitated around the table.

When there are limited resources and few physical reminders about coal mining heritage that are accessible to ex-industrial communities, memory is a valuable yet receding resource. Sherry Lee Linkon states that 'people and communities are shaped by their histories – by experience, by memory, and by the way the economic and social practices of the past frame the structures, ideas, and values that influence our lives long after those practices have ceased to be effective'.[155] For Linkon, this is also true of the generations growing up in a newly post-industrial community, since the impact of deindustrialisation is felt long after the industry is gone and not only for those who directly experienced industrial culture. This theory is evidenced by my own experiences as a working-class woman from an ex-mining community raised in the aftermath of deindustrialisation, who has grown up with a sense of displacement. The capturing of memories and the intergenerational transferal of information that is facilitated around the tables at community arts events is more vital now than ever as the coal mining

[154] Heritage Alliance, 'The (2020) Heritage, Health and Wellbeing: A Heritage Alliance Report'. (2020), p. 4.
[155] Sherry Lee Linkon, 'Narrating past and future: Deindustrialised landscapes as resources', (2013) p. 38.

generation starts to disappear. It is something that has been put into practice throughout this research.

During my residency with the Bolsover District Cultural Corridor, I co-facilitated tile-making workshops at Pleasley Pit with potter Jane Woodbridge. Each tile made contributed to a permanent installation on site. My role was to capture conversations around the table and share them with the local school children who painted the finished tiles. Everyone was asked about their connection to coal mining. Unsurprisingly, in the adult sessions, more people had a direct connection to coal mining, with one gentleman having worked as a miner and others having a relative who had worked down the pit. Although there was a handful of school pupils who mentioned a grandfather who was a miner, for the majority, their connection to coal mining was that they could see the chimney at Pleasley Pit from their school playground.[156] In the feedback for the sessions, one participant said that attending the session made them feel part of the history of Pleasley Pit, one expressed their excitement that their work would be immortalised for years to come, and another saw its potential as a learning tool for future generations. Sometimes art for art's sake is enough, but in this case, the permanence of their work stands as evidence of their communal collaboration, regardless of their motivations for partaking or their connections to coal mining. It just goes to show that engaging communities with industrial heritage through the arts can leave a lasting legacy that becomes part of the community's history and collective identity.

Reconciling the Past and Present

In my conversations with participants, I've found that it is not necessarily the coal mining experience that people grieve, but the community spirit that was impacted by its loss. Throughout this project and the various subprojects that have contributed towards my overall research, I have worked with people of all ages, with varying connections to coal mining. For some, their only connection is living in an ex-mining town. In the tile-making sessions at Pleasey Pit, I met people who used to work at the pit, people whose grandparents worked at the pit and people who had no connection to coal mining, but walked their dogs around the country park every day. Regardless of their relationship with coal mining heritage, their motivations for attending that day were the same: To connect with their community.[157]

[156] Appendix, fig. A.2.
[157] Appendix, fig. A.2.

The importance of memory when communities struggle to reconcile an industrial past with a 'socially-excluded present and an uncertain future' has been discussed throughout this thesis. Still, one thing that the people of Bolsover can be certain of is that the Junction Arts lantern parade will run every year, as it has done for the last three decades. It is one of the longest-running light processions in the UK, having started in November 1994, the year after Bolsover Colliery closed. Perhaps this is a coincidence, or a conscious act to bring light to the town after a dark decade of strikes and pit closures. On the thirtieth anniversary in 2024, lanterns from the first-ever parade were carried in the procession – lanterns shaped like miners' lamps. Whatever the motivations for establishing a lantern parade in Bolsover, the result is an ongoing tradition that reconciles the past with the present and parades a way into the future.

At the time of writing, Junction Arts is gearing up for its fiftieth anniversary celebrations, with the launch of the new National Lottery Heritage Funded project *50 Stories for 50 Years*, collecting the stories of participants, artists, volunteers, partners and staff. These memories will form a new digital archive preserved for future generations, alongside a documentary film and a touring exhibition. Managing Director Emily Bowman sees this as an opportunity to evidence the long-term legacy of participatory arts and the stories of creativity, resilience and connection in post-industrial and rural Derbyshire.[158]

Claire Wellesley-Smith said that offering a way to explore the industrial heritage of an area through socially engaged art projects attempts to ask questions about how people remember both industrial work and its loss.[159] However, the real question is, how do we respond to that loss and pave a way forward? Like many others researching ex-industrial communities, I started this project believing that the damage caused by the strike and deindustrialisation was irreparable. But as a community member said to me in a recent workshop, "Community isn't lost, it just looks different now". Although community arts does not fill the gap left by industry, it is an avenue for people to reconnect with the things that could have been lost to deindustrialisation and to preserve them for generations to come, which is especially valuable in the digital age. Community arts gives people a purpose; something to work towards and something to come together for. To answer Jeffer's question, "Is it art for art's sake?", my answer is, yes and no. The output of community art does not need to be socially engaged, but that does not mean that it is not a socially engaged process.

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[158] Emily Bowden, Junction Arts, (2026).
[159] Claire Wellesley-Smith, (2022). 'Crafting Resilience: Cultural heritage and community engagement in post-industrial textile communities', p. 56.

Chapter Reflection

As this chapter has demonstrated, poetry and the arts are valuable tools for both measuring the impact of deindustrialisation and inherited trauma upon working-class coal mining identities, but also as an outlet for this trauma, which helps us reconcile the past with the present in order to move forward. The first essay in this chapter is a direct continuation of research that began with my Master's dissertation, which explored the trauma of deindustrialisation as depicted by the poetry of Helen Mort and Ian McMillan. Through the exploration of suspended post-industrial characters, as documented by female-identifying poets, we gain an understanding of inherited trauma and its influence on post-industrial female coal mining identities. Similarly, a close reading of Andrew McMillan highlights the tension between coal mining identity and sexuality, as determined by the proximity to coal. It would seem that the greater the distance, the easier it is to marry the two experiences, since the trauma is not firsthand, but then there comes a self-consciousness in claiming trauma that does not belong to us, but which we have felt the consequences of all our lives.

If literary analysis helps us understand the 'why', participatory arts is the answer, offering an outlet for displaced identities. Like post-industrial literature, it takes something abstract and makes it concrete, so that identities can then anchor themselves to it. In Bolsover, newer generations will never know what the view from Bolsover Castle looked like, complete with headstocks, but they can be sure that the Lantern Parade will run every year. A personal motivation for conducting this research was to remedy my own fractured sense of self, stemming from the disconnect between my heritage and identity, and my displacement within my community. Through this research and the subprojects I have worked on, I have found my community and place within it.

Conclusion

Overview

In this chronological analysis of a century's worth of coal mining literature, clear patterns have emerged in how the relationship between coal mining identities and gender/sexual identities has diverged and converged over time, as influenced by changing political and social contexts, to determine how industrial trauma has impacted post-industrial identities. Three main strands of coal mining identities have been examined across the thesis, including the female coal mining experience, queer coal mining and post-industrial perspectives and the post-industrial identities who have inherited this trauma.

The highest concentration of writing produced by working-class women comes at times of political unrest, such as the General Strike in 1926 and the Miners' Strike of 1984-5. This thesis has demonstrated how, in such times, poetics are used as a means of self-preservation and political activism, which in itself impacted the female coal mining experience by enabling women to enter into a conversation that they were excluded from in 1842. It has also identified the need for more research into the non-striking female perspective by attempting to create space for these voices to be heard.

Literature explicitly depicting queer coal mining perspectives does not surface until later in the discourse. The stories explored in the thesis, even when depicting the strike, are told retrospectively, reflecting the real dangers faced by queer people, right up to the present. Although the activism of LGSM during the 1980s is well documented, and *Pride* offers a glimpse into the queer coal mining experience in its Welsh setting, it is important to remember that this London-centric perspective does not completely reflect the realities of queer people living in coal mining communities during this time. Hopefully, with the publication of McMillan's *Pity*, more queer perspectives will materialise in the literature.

By the time we arrive at chapter three, a culture of inherited trauma is clearly cultivated. The post-industrial literature examined in the final chapter is haunted by death, disaster and deindustrialisation, and demonstrates conflict between industrial heritage and individual identity. There is a clear sense of guilt carried into texts depicting the post-industrial experience, associated with social mobility, opportunities, and escape. In creating something tangible, like a book, the authors can create something physical to anchor to in the absence of industrial infrastructure. It solidifies the experiences of a generation once removed from coal

mining as a trauma in itself, without the associated guilt of claiming a trauma that does not belong to us. It is not about being defined by the trauma, but using it to reconcile the past with the present so that we can clearly see a way forward. In coming to understand why I feel the way I do, by identifying with poets such as Mort and McMillan, and through using poetic inquiry, I have gained a deeper understanding of myself and my generation, which I can now do something substantial with, rather than mourning something I never lost in the first place.

Evaluation

The research's shortcomings are also its strengths. The fact that the research was conducted 'at the coalface', alongside working full-time and contributing to community art projects, has ensured that the research retained its authenticity and that the motivations remained clear and uncompromising. The projects carried out informed or were informed by the research, meaning that the processes and outcomes contributed to the result. These experiences also developed me both personally and professionally, allowing me to pave a clear way forward in my career.

However, relying on a Student Finance loan as a working-class fulltime researcher brought significant limitations. Time, capacity and financial restraints meant I was restricted to how often I could volunteer, utilise university resources and visit museums and archives. Living off campus also created a disconnect between university life and me, which impacted my identity as an academic and made me question the validity of my research. The consequence of this was mostly personal, but I found an outlet through the research and poetry I was producing. Working as the editor of *This University Life* for two years also helped to remedy this disconnect by finding a community at the university, alongside support from my supervisors.

I would not change how this research was conducted. Had I been successful in securing funding for this project, things would look very different. Conducting research in this unconventional way has allowed me to benefit my community directly and to establish a legacy for my work. However, with more dedicated time and resources, the research could have encompassed more marginalised perspectives, including trans, ethnic minority and disabled coal mining identities. This is how I intend to expand the research going forward.

I began this research with a displaced sense of self as a working-class woman raised in the aftermath of deindustrialisation. Selfishly, my initial motivations were to find something solid to anchor to, at a time when the places and people that defined my heritage were receding. I also hoped to address the conflict between the collective working-class industrial heritage shared with my community and my individual identity as a queer female creative. Through this

research, I have rebuilt a relationship with my community, reconnected with my heritage and have paved a clear path into the future. I no longer feel displaced and hope that through the continuation of my work in the field of participatory arts, I can help others (re)find their place in the story of coal mining.

Final Reflection

The sun pools in through the window on an uncharacteristically warm March afternoon. I'm seasons away from the me who scraped frost from her windshield this morning, before setting off to Hardwick Hall for a writing retreat. Now, I'm sitting around a meeting table in the stables with other female writers, all working on separate projects, but united by the same desire for connection in what can be an isolating vocation. We go around the table and share what we're working on. Some are writing poems, others are working on novels, and quite a few of us are students. I declare that today is the day I finish my PhD.

As we write, I close my eyes and convince myself that the tapping of fingers on keyboards is the sound of spectral hooves. The laughter of the National Trust staff next door is the echo of bantering stable workers from yesteryear. This makes me feel a little more at home, yet it's still not quite right. There is only one place appropriate for this moment.

I pull up a photograph on my phone from the last time I climbed Crag Hill. My feet imagine the pressure of the boulder beneath me. My skin prickles at the memory of the biting wind. My eyes search the landscape, expecting to find the view complete, as a reward for arriving at this moment, against all odds. But of course, they don't.

Instead, I look to the space where the headstocks once stood and see the place where my best friend and I played as children, pretending we were in an episode of *Doctor Who*, exploring an alien landscape. I see the nature reserve where I walked my childhood dog, Charlie, with my mum and feel more at peace with the absence, because now I understand how it all fits into the story of coal mining in Creswell. If I could go anywhere in time and space, it would still be to this spot, to see the view complete with headstocks, but for now, it's enough to have found something concrete to anchor to in the space left behind.

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Appendices

A. Reflections from the Bolsover District Cultural Corridor Report (2024)

1. The Cultural Garden

Our roots are **powerful**, our **pride** runs deep
but through **creative** winters
our leaves shrivel and fall into a heap.

Our **community** can be **conflicted**,
our branches can break,
but in Spring, our **bright**, **bold** blossoms begin to wake.

In Summer each leaf grows in **green vibrancy**
opportunity, **inclusion** and **freedom**
is **conducive** to an **unstoppable legacy**.

The leaves begin to turn once Autumn starts
with **hope embedded** in our **hearts**
we sew **resilient** seeds of **optimism**, **bravery** and **art**.

By E.M Birdie and Tyler Turner. Purple words provided by participants at the Cultural Corridor Consultation Event (October 2024) when asked to describe the Cultural Corridor in one word.

2. **Tyler | Pleasley Pit** | *October 16th, 2024*

It was a misty morning at Pleasley Pit when I arrived for a tilemaking workshop led by Jayne Woodbridge. It felt strange seeing so much white surrounding a site associated with black. The familiar headstocks with their proud winding wheels and the chimney that can be seen from every bedroom window in Pleasley stood bold against the colourless backdrop. Whenever I visit Pleasley, I feel guilty for every moment spent not looking at its industrial infrastructure, so I paused to take in as much as time would allow.

When I regretfully managed to pry myself away (after taking the same photo I've taken countless times before), I headed for the Visitor Centre to show my face. Before I was the Cultural Corridor Writer-in-Residence, I was (and tenuously remain to be) the Poet-in-Residence at Pleasley Pit. I visited one day with my mum, mama and baby sister and asked the Visitor Centre Manager if she'd ever considered having a resident poet. "I don't know what that means but yes, let's do it!" and the rest is history. Deborah Bramwell loves saying yes. When she was asked about making a community quilt, the answer was yes. When she was asked about housing a community-made tile mosaic to stand at Pleasely forevermore, the answer was yes. When a strange, tattooed girl with a face full of piercings asked to make this place her home, the answer (thankfully) was yes. Her creativity, openness and passion for heritage and community are an absolute inspiration.

It felt right, returning to the site I had become so familiar with at the start of my residency in 2023 when I visited every Wednesday before the day job made it more difficult. I'd spent many mornings in the café, listening to the chatter of cutlery and conversations. The synth-heavy backing track provided by the old-school boombox made it feel like I was in a drama from the 1980s. Walking back into this environment was like stepping into a well-loved pair of slippers.

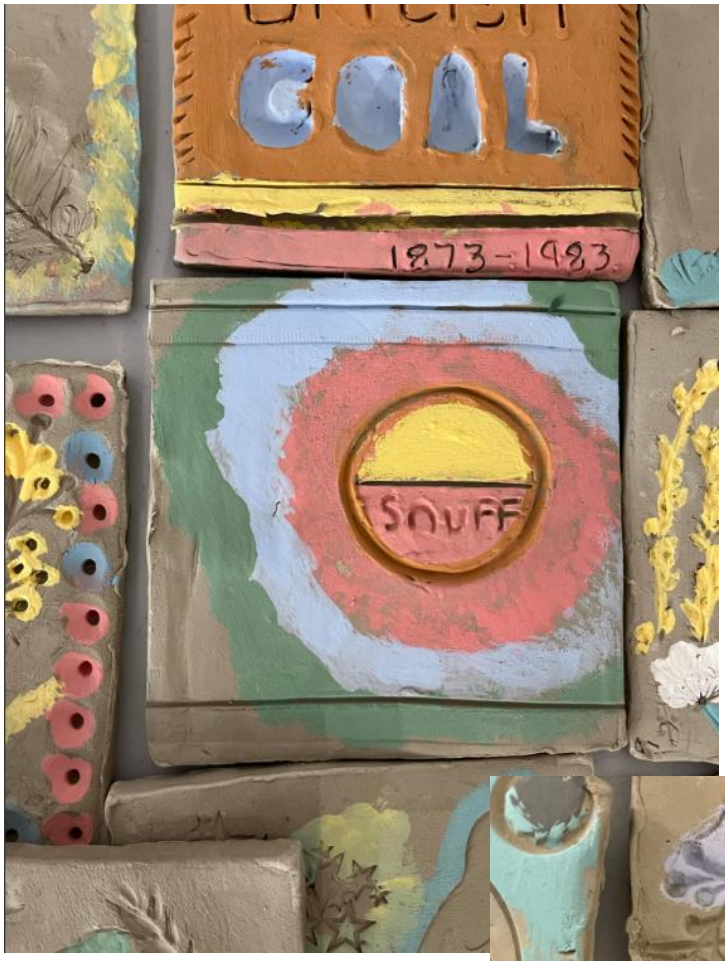
The two sessions were interestingly contrasted. The first, taking place in the morning, was attended by an intergenerational group. The older people in the room shared their coal mining experiences and connections, and the younger ones were mostly the relatives of those people, all united by the coal in their blood. I spoke to Vincent Chiverton, who told me about his short-lived stint as a miner. He told me that coal mining was not a life his father had hoped for him. George Alfred Chiverton had worked in the mines himself but left due to an accident. You might assume that this was an occupational accident, caused by machinery or an explosion but Vincent told me that his father had suffered an aneurysm while working underground. "He described the aneurysm like an explosion in his head. He was never the same man and he never worked again from there."

The second group was much less reflective and was more interested in living in the moment. That evening the atmosphere was electric. It felt like a girls' night out. We joked that we should

bring wine next time, though the tiles might have looked very different had alcohol been involved. As I worked my way around the group, I found that very few had coal mining connections, though often visited Pleasley Pit to walk their dogs in the surrounding country park, or to take photographs of the moon. Some had never been before despite living on the doorstep. Most had decided to venture out that night thanks to a shared message on their street's WhatsApp group.

The stories I gathered were shared with students at Anthony Bek School at a later date when they visited to paint the tiles. The children were gripped by the stories about the dangers of mining, medical officers who inspired their paramedic daughters and picking coal out of the skin of exhausted miners. I was touched by the similarities noted by the students, no matter how small. My personal favourite was, "I can see the chimney from my school playground". In between painting the tiles with Jayne and exploring the site with Deborah, the students penned letters to the older participants, asking them questions and telling them interesting stories about themselves. As a coalfields researcher, it is important to me to capture coal mining stories while I can and share them with younger generations so that they can live on forever. However, these sessions have proven that we also need to capture newer memories as they are being made, otherwise we will be in the same boat years later down the line.

3. Tiles made at Pleasley Pit.



4. Tyler | Doe Lea Centre | *January 7th, 2025*

Snow is a beautiful disruption and beautifully disrupt it did on the first week of the new year. My little yellow car was in the garage so I hitched a lift to the Doe Lea Centre, which allowed me to experience the entry into the village differently. The main roads were clear of ice, but I felt like a sledger descending the slope from Glapwell into Doe Lea. Just a day or two before, I had confessed to my colleagues that I had never been sledging. This surprised everyone, given my adventurous, outdoorsy nature and childhood proximity to Crag Hill, which calls people from around the district to my home village, Creswell. But right then in the car, I imagined what it might have been like to slide into Doe Lea on a plastic sledge, speeding past its iconic red squiggle of a sculpture too fast to distinguish the letters but reassured in the knowledge that it spells out a welcome. I would never have registered the flowers that give the sculpture its name, 'The Dancing Flowers of Doe Lea' by Tonkin Liu. Honestly, I hadn't noticed them at all before I started frequenting the village because they can only be seen on the way in. Doe Lea is not a place you pass through, you have to enter with intent. Without this big red feature writhing like a Lovecraftian creature on this otherwise insignificant traffic island, drivers would never know it was there. It dares passersby to look at things differently and to pay attention, then rewards visitors with a floral 'thank you' stencilled on by pupils at Bramley Vale Primary School as if to say, "Now you've seen me, you can never unsee". I can't think of a better welcome to what has become the unofficial hub of the Cultural Corridor.

Naturally, bad weather means lower numbers for the Ladies of Letters – the beginner writing programme for women over fifty to develop writing skills and form new friendships to improve wellbeing and combat loneliness. That was my reason for venturing into the village on that wintery Tuesday, to finally meet the writers I had heard much about. That day, I'd arrived early to meet with Kate to reflect on the project and to discuss the foundations of what would later become this book. The Ladies of Letters session was to be my last event as the Cultural Corridor Writer-in-Residence at the Doe Lea Centre (except for the Glapwell Creative Heritage Event tagged onto February), so it was nice to reflect specifically on my time there. Here, we held our Cultural Corridor Consultation Event in October, where Emma and I wrote our Community Tree poem featured at the start of this book. It has been the location of meetings and planning, where the journey began back in May with my interview and close to where I made my debut at our Willow Walk event in June. Most importantly, it became a weekly base camp for us writers between September and December, where we joined the Youth Group for eleven sessions on Wednesday evenings.

Unfortunately, as we discussed our highs there came a low, when we received the news we had been dreading. The Ladies of Letters session was cancelled due to the poor weather. This would mean that I'd never get to work with the Ladies as part of my residency but having waited so long to meet them, I wasn't prepared to give up so easily.

The snow began to thaw over the coming week and I reached out to the Ladies to see if they'd accept me as a participant in their group and they warmly welcomed me as a guest. The session was delightful, full of conversation, laughter, stories and some surprise connections. I'm glad that it worked out this way and that I was able to experience the group on their terms, rather than as a fleeting imposter. Because the Ladies of Letters is not a group that one simply passes through, you have to visit with intent if you hope to see the flowers.

5. Doe Lea Youth Group: Notes from Tyler

The Cultural Corridor Writer-in-Residence and Shadow Writer-in-Residence attended eleven Youth Group sessions at the Doe Lea Centre between September 18th and December 18th, 2024. The Doe Lea Youth Group is a long-standing social group for young people, hosted weekly on Wednesday evenings. Our ongoing theme was 'Manifesto', which allowed us to explore things that matter most to young people living within and around the corridor and things they'd like to change. Before our involvement with the group, they had worked with artist Lucie Maycock as part of the Cultural Corridor project. The sessions with us were a continuation of those with Lucie, as directed by the young people in attendance. Recurring themes included climate change, bullying, animal rights, school and Youth Group.

This has been the most challenging yet rewarding part of the project for us as writers. It was daunting to enter a setting designed for decompression away from the pressures of education and engage an existing group of young people with writing. At times, it was a reminder that this is a job. We quickly learned to think on our feet, roll with the punches, and carry a bag of tricks with us. I frequently joked to Emma that I felt more like an art teacher than a writer, but experimenting with materials, activities and forms saw us successfully engage most participants. We had a core group of young people who engaged from the get-go, some older participants who occasionally joined in and others (mainly young men) who steered clear until we reached out to them, using the dart board and pool table to inspire collaborative poems.

The Writers-in-Residences' tenure at the Doe Lea Youth Group was less about output and more about research and engagement. A clearer plan from the beginning could have led to a more tangible product but we succeeded in establishing a relationship with the group, engaging with them and learning from them. To enter a group of (mostly) non-writers with a rigid plan might have set us up for failure. By learning about their interests, motivations and frustrations and how best to engage them in a chaotic environment, we are confident that more tangible outcomes can be achieved in future collaborations with the group. More importantly, we successfully engaged participants from every clique within the group and showed them that writing isn't just about academia and grades. Big outcomes like books and exhibitions are great celebrations of the work achieved throughout a project, but sometimes, the biggest outcome is a poem or artwork taken home to a proud parent. For me, the biggest result was the protestations we faced when telling the group it was our last session, however bittersweet the moment was. But thankfully, we were invited by the young people to keep returning every Wednesday, forever.

6. Tyler | Hardwick Ponds | *August 13th, 2024*

It was a midsummer morning when Emma and I walked the Sculpture trail at Hardwick and planned our Golden Hour Writing for Wellness Walk. I first met Emma at Hardwick Hall, January 2024, but she wouldn't meet me until a month or two later in the café at Bolsover Castle. It was the back end of Hardwick's Wintertide event, in which the house is dressed for a Tudor Christmas, with the Lord of Misrule wreaking havoc across the site. To my delighted surprise, a trail of poetry boards greeted me and led me by the hand through the house. I held my novelty lantern to each board and read the words that wrapped me in a festive warmth against the bleak nothingness that often comes with the first month of the year. By the end of my visit, I declared that I needed to meet this E.M. Birdie.

Emma and I had already started working together before our involvement in the Cultural Corridor, as she is one of my wonderful shadow writers for the Bolsover Young Writers sessions I lead at Bolsover Castle in partnership with Writing East Midlands and English Heritage's youth engagement programme Shout Out Loud. I was incredibly lucky to have Emma join me as the Cultural Corridor Shadow Writer-in-Residence, too. Not only is she a fantastic facilitator who helps draw out the best in our participants, she is also an astounding poet whose work inspires me by showing me the magic in the natural world and dares me to experiment with form and language. Her knowledge and skills gained through her volunteer role at Hardwick have been vital to this project, but with this session in particular, I was able to step back and let Emma's words guide me once again, but this time through the Hardwick grounds, when the sun was warm on our faces, the water was still and inviting and the trees whispered to each other as we passed through. It was a less frantic scene than the moments that came before it.

I had just hurried down to the Park Centre in my little yellow car after not realising that it was in a separate location from the main halls. It shames me how little I knew about this heritage site before my involvement with the project but for a long time, I had seen it as an inaccessible fortress that I would only dare to venture to on the rarest of occasions. I wrongly saw it as a place in my community that did not belong to me, that I was priced out of and wasn't wanted at. This is a feeling I had been accustomed to as a girl raised in Creswell, where our prehistoric gorge sits just on the outskirts, close enough to be called 'Creswell Crags' but far enough to feel separate from the village. Growing up, my grandad would tell me stories about exploring the caves, climbing the limestone cliffs and traversing the fields above. Whereas all I've ever known is a site that keeps Creswell behind bars. Interestingly, during a project I worked on with Junction Arts, I'd had a

conversation with the lead artist about the witch marks in Robin Hood's cave. "When does it stop being history and start becoming graffiti?" Why do we value the marks of Creswell of yesteryear but prevent any further additions to this story? I would learn that people in the communities closest to Hardwick felt the same. That's why it was so important for us to help local people take ownership of their heritage sites as part of the Cultural Corridor project and to add their lines to their stories.

We came to the first sculpture just moments after setting off up the dirt path. It is a simple homage to the quarry that once operated at Hardwick, with a mallet stood on its head, carved into the stone. It reminded me of Excalibur, daring walkers to reach forward and pluck it free. I considered trying but cowered from the likelihood that it would deem me unworthy. I envisioned the worthy hand, calloused and stiffened by years of hard labour. Hands similar to those I grew up around, except those were stained black. Emma told me that the prominent buildings in the area, Bolsover Castle and Hardwick Halls, obtained their stone from quarries opened specifically for the building work. It made me think of the chimney at Whitwell Quarry that always lets me know I'm almost home and suddenly I didn't feel so unworthy.

7. **Tyler | Hardwick Old Hall |** *July 19th, 2024*

Everyone knows Hardwick Hall. The home of Bess of Hardwick with more glass than wall, world-famous tapestries and a story that entices visitors from miles around. But despite the definitive 'E S' stones worn like a crown on its roof, dominating the Derbyshire skyline, it's the Old Hall that can be seen from the M1. Its white face beckons like a songless siren, calling travellers to the ruins.

The first time I visited the Old Hall with my partner was on one of the hottest days last year. Visitors were milling about in shorts, caps and sunglasses, seeking refuge from the heat in the white ruins as if on a Spanish holiday. In the grassy centre of the foundations, I found Beverly, a volunteer I know from my day job at Bolsover Castle, who gave us an introductory talk about the building. Her hair caught fire in the sun as she recounted its story in expert detail, just as I imagined Bess' might have done on such a day. To summarise, Bess built the hall between 1587 and 1596 to replace her father's medieval manor house. She began constructing the new hall in 1590, intending for the two halls to complement one another like two wings of a building. The Old Hall eventually fell to ruin when in the 18th century, Bess' descendants, the Devonshires, came to favour their house at Chatsworth and partially dismantled the original Hardwick Hall in the 1750s. I know from spending most of my life in a partially ruined building myself, that the quickest way to ruin a building is to remove the roof.

After thanking Beverly and departing to embark on our languid exploration, we climbed to the highest point and looked over the Derbyshire landscape, feeling as Bess might once have done. In the distance, I noticed little white tents pooled into a dip in the fields. At first, I didn't realise what I was looking at was my venue for the next day, until my partner said, "You're reading there tomorrow". It was the early signs of the Stainsby Festival, rising like a serpentine ridge from the waves of fields. Stainsby is a festival that prides itself on being a year older than Glastonbury. First held in 1969, the folk festival, like Hardwick, has stood the test of time. It's one of the many festivals that make Derbyshire the 'County of Festivals', according to *Arts Derbyshire*. As a Whitwell Festival loyalist, I'd never attended this event before and I had no idea of the impact that this day, still so early into my residency, would have on myself and others.

Half a year on, I now have the power to return to that moment with hindsight. I can cast myself back to the window I leaned from, phone in hand with the camera app open and zoomed in to the max to excitedly share on Instagram that I could see tomorrow's office from here. The resulting photo is on my desk beside me as I write; I lean into it as a window into the past and project myself across the fields, aiming for that ridged back of tents. From my bird's eye perspective, I can see myself struggling out from my little yellow car in the already bustling carpark with my antique (and

very heavy) typewriter. Luckily, Emma, Kate and Rich, the Doe Lea Centre Manager, are just around the corner and come to my rescue. Over time, I'd joke that it feels like we're a band, lugging equipment, setting up tents and performing at music festivals. Indeed we would later perform at a Whitwell Festival of Music event on the Rotten Poetry stage under the umbrella of 'The Cultural Corridor Poets', which felt pretty rock 'n' roll.

Along the road and down the grassy slope into the heart of the festival, I see the tent that we would perform at to close our stint at Stainsby, empty and waiting to take us in. I backtrack slightly and find us under our purple gazebo. I'm clacking away on the typewriter while Emma entertains our first participant with fun, folk-inspired writing prompts and activities. That was our set-up for the day – people ordered a haiku on any chosen topic from me (and I mean, *anything*) and then worked with Emma while I cooked up their order. Across the event, I churned out over thirty haiku poems. Some silly, concerning cat feet, cartoon characters and political satire. Others more thoughtful, including themes such as forgiveness, courage and aspiration. Most profoundly was this first order of the day. The customer approached us with curious openness and after hearing our intentions said, "Go on then, do me a poem about pride".

For a moment, my astral body snaps back into the physical one looking at the photo on the phone at my desk. Open on my laptop is an email we received about a fortnight after the event.

> Hiya
>
> I met you at Stainsby Festival this year and you kindly wrote me a haiku about Pride. At the time this floored me as it was just perfectly what my soul needed to hear.
>
> I wanted to let you know that I look at the haiku most days and it's profound every time.
>
> I wanted you to know that your words that you wrote me on a relatively silly Saturday morning have changed me so much for the better and let me leap forwards in my own growth.
>
> I have no idea how it is to be a poet or an artist, but very occasionally I get to hear how I've made a difference in my profession and it fuels me to keep going and it's very much my hope that this email has a similar effect for you.

> So thank you. Very much. You've made a huge difference and one that I'm privileged to pass on.

Once again, reading over this email has floored me. Often as a writer, it can feel like you are screaming into the void, especially at a time when the internet has over-saturated the profession, leading to the decline of print media and the rise of web publications that don't pay writers. Even as a facilitator, it's easy to doubt whether you're making any real difference when workshop numbers are low or you're struggling to engage young people in chaotic environments. However, this interaction helped me see the difference my profession makes to individuals in my community. I might not ever be lucky enough to write a best seller or change the world with my words, but that isn't what I strive for anymore. Because we changed someone's world in three lines on a silly morning at Stainsby Festival, just as Bess changed the Derbyshire skyline forever with just two initials.

Pride

Like a lion's roar
that swells deep within my chest
I wear my pride loud

8. **Tyler | Stockley Trail** | *May 9th, 2024*

I don't often get nervous anymore. It's not surprising, since I'm used to performing on stage at festivals, bearing my soul to strangers through my poetry and working with different groups of people every week. Planning isn't something I'm strict about – I prefer to go where the wind takes me, think on my feet and live and work in the moment, so I rarely allow myself time to overthink. But on the day of my interview for Writer-in-Residence for the Cultural Corridor, I was the most nervous I'd been in a long while. So nervous it made me feel sick. I wanted this more than anything. Whenever I feel anxious, I like to spend time in nature. It's a cliché but it really does help me reground myself. Walking is a mindful activity that connects us with the earth, literally and figuratively. So when I woke that morning to a tightened chest and clammy palms, feeling like someone had switched off the gravity in my room, I knew exactly what I needed to do.

It was a glorious early summer's day when I decided to walk five odd miles to my interview, the kind that fills you with a nostalgic warmth. The kind you search for in midwinter when the cold reaches your bones and you beg the sun to crack through the clouds. I remember what I was wearing – a long, floral dress I had gotten in the *New Look* sale years before. It was bright orange, with hints of pink in the petals and a frilly collar that gave it a vintage tinge. It had been reduced because it was missing a button at the back but I had secured it with a safety pin. Looking back, I can't think of a more apt dress to wear to an interview for a job with the Cultural Corridor; a project that enhances the colour in the communities it serves, combines the arts and heritage and encourages local people to take ownership of both, and acts as the safety pin holding it all together. The only thing that would have made the dress even more perfect was if it was purple.

My journey started in Hillstown, Bolsover. I drove down the hill and parked my little yellow car in New Bolsover, the residential estate that once housed the miners who worked at Bolsover Colliery. This was a fitting (though admittedly unconscious) decision since my involvement with the Corridor began with a residency at Pleasley Pit Museum that bloomed into something much bigger. Before joining the project, I thought I knew Pleasley the best out of all the communities along the A617 but I still had lots to unearth. I had yet to meet the locals who had no mining connections but took ownership of their pit in other ways, through dog walking, photography and art – I had yet to realise that those memories are just as vital and run just as deep coal.

I headed across the fields in the direction of the Carr Vale Nature Reserve, then joined the Stockley Trail. The trail is looked after by the Derbyshire Countryside Service, whom I used to work for. In all my time there, I was based at the Tapton Lock Visitor Centre so never explored many of the parklands and trails that I answered queries about daily and deployed wardens to

whenever someone called complaining about fly-tipping. Walking along it for the first time then gave me the impression that I was walking backwards through my life but still progressing forward, like I'd stuck my shoes on back to front. As I strolled beneath the canopy of green and white elderflower trees, I was unaware I was walking parallel to the River Doe Lea; the river named after a village that seems to run parallel to everything while remaining just out of sight.

I fell off the Stockley Trail at Glapwell and emerged next to the Starbucks – a solemn reminder that, like most communities along the A617, this is a place to pass through on your morning commute, where the only reason you stop is to fuel up on caffeine, before nosing your way back into the never-ending trickle of traffic. But when you pause to remember with the people of Glapwell, you find it is a place full of stories. Further along is Bramley Vale, with its winding wheels a reminder of what it has lost but the Primary School with its woodland classroom a reassurance that when you nurture the present, the future looks much brighter. Then, as I came over the hill and down, Doe Lea shouted "Welcome!" up at me from the bottom.

"You've walked the Cultural Corridor!" Kate beamed when I arrived at my interview with her and Sian Tower (Writing East Midlands) and told them about my journey. It hadn't occurred to me before then that that is what I had done, or at least partly. Suddenly, the last couple of hours seemed much more significant.

Going home always feels quicker because we have already taken in the surroundings once before, so our brains are quick to repaint the picture. But on the walk back, I slowed right down and became more mindful of my steps and surroundings, how each place and face blurred into the other, wondering what stories hid behind the passing smiles. The first thing I noticed as I left Doe Lea was the Dancing Flowers. Yellow, blue, pink, white and purple, all waltzing together along the red, steel bough. All different shapes and sizes, all unique but united by place.

I'll never stop seeing the flowers.

9. Poems by Cultural Corridor participants.

The Miner's Journey

A vicious blue-black carbon river
Snaked along his skin
Carrying memories of darkest days
And faultless wasted dreams of the young lad
A crimson cap replaced with red
Red anger from my heart what this wises of men
Was condemned to the choking night.

Dear Pleasley Pit

I can see you from my school's playground.
I listened to your memories and I'm overwhelmed by your story!
My favourite part was when you became a nurse,
a miner, a proud daughter.

You and I have a couple of things in common:
My great grandad was a miner back in the day
My dad lies in front of the coal fire when he gets home from work.

I would like to ask you questions:
What inspired you?
Was it scary in the mine?
Did coal stain your skin?
I'm sorry for being so nosey.

Thank you for sharing your memories.

Yours faithfully,
Anthony Bek School.

Gardening

Grass becomes weakened

And the flowers,

Rose and myrtle

Plants are covered in

Dollar spot

Euonymus Japonicus is a winter plant

Narcissus dwarf is a spring flower.

Except Tuesdays

I exercise every day
Except Tuesdays
That's my day off
I exercise to music
Just five tracks
I do my steps
Through the kitchen and the lounge
Fifteen steps there
And fifteen steps back again
I stretch my arms and legs
I stretch my face
With the blinds closed
No one needs to see that
My ghost face
Just five tracks
Some are just rights
But Jesus, some go on
Some are fast
So I dance
With the blinds closed
No one needs to see that
Some are slow
So I walk and stretch my arms
And I shadow box
I have the stance
And the temper
But no one to hit
Until I close my eyes
And see the man
In his white van
Who cut me up
And waved one finger

And I punch him
Ten times
Everyday
Except Tuesdays

I Like Music

All sorts of music, various styles and various types. I used to like Soul music but didn't buy records as we didn't have a record player. We had a tape recorder, I could record music and re-record over it the following week. My dad loved Classical music and enjoyed going to concerts at the City Hall. When I got married, my husband had a record player and records. I remember listening to his rock stuff – Pink Floyd, Moody Blues, The Who. I worked at Boots and could buy albums at a discount. His sister loved L. Cohan and this was my first purchase. Rod Steward and Donovan and Carly Simon soon followed.

Holiday at the Seaside

Towels	Magazines
Swimsuit	Queen CDs
Dresses 3	Love album
Underwear	Celine Dion
Trousers 2	Money for drinks etc.
T Shirts 4	Tights
Shirts 2	Suncream
Blouses	
Nightwear	
Sweats for journey	
Soft drinks	

Going on holiday to the seaside as a child meant paddling in the sea, eating ice cream and fish & chips, and watching the seagulls ducking and diving. Most of our holidays were spent in the seaside town of Skegness. There was always a photographer to take your photo. Mum always dived out the way when one was around. We used to go to the amusement arcade for push the penny and slot machines. One day I remember booking a show and meeting Dickie Valentine—so many memories of those golden days.

Letter to Santa

Dear Santa,

I've been a very good girl this year, so could you please give me a Lamborghini and a fast man.
I promise I'll look after them and give them both a polish every day.
If you think I deserve it, I'd also like some chocolate and nuts.

Thank you very much,

Carol XX

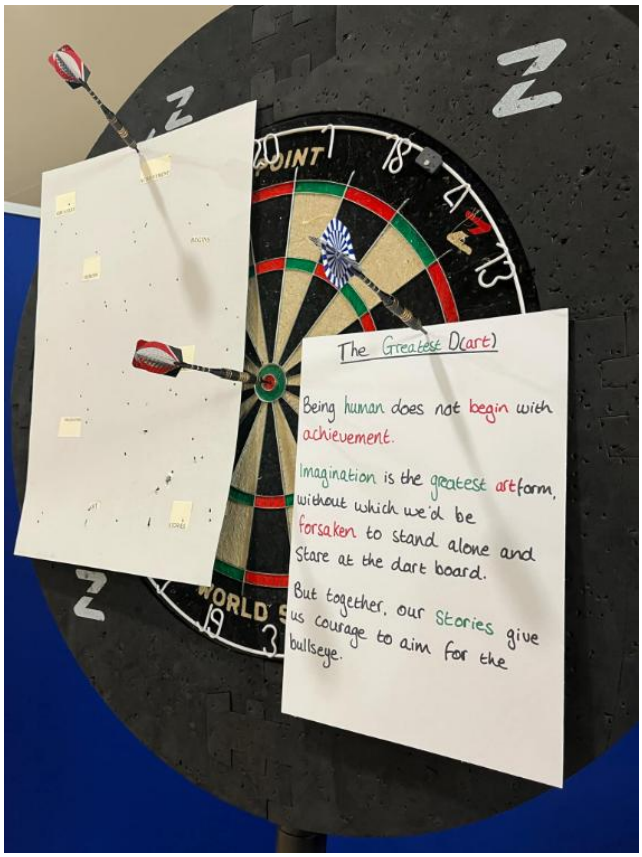
The Greatest D(art)

Being human does not begin with achievement.
Imagination is the greatest art form,
Without which we'd be forsaken to stand alone
and stare at the dartboard.
But together, our stories give us courage
To aim for the bullseye.

Potluck

Growing is knowing the worth of the cue.
Succeeding is relinquishing control of the break.
Part of the journey is accepting support from the rest,
in order to pot your best.

By Doe Lea Youth Group Boys



I'm in deep thought when I am in lessons but other people might struggle in lessons. When I write stories I feel like I'm in my own imaginative world. I also feel power as this is my own story and nobody else's, I get to choose what happens.

By Emily

Friends are your bestfriends. They made your life better when people made you cry. They got rid of the people who got with your boyfriend while you were dating him. And they snitched on the people who talked behind your back…

By Willow

B. Extracts from the Greater Creative ‘Squares’ Report (2025)

Creative Capture

I joined the project as the Creative Catcher in July, once significant work had already been done. There is always some apprehension when a new face joins the picture, so I prioritised building trust by getting stuck in and “letting the community teach me”, as Freelance Producer Mel Perkins advised. To reflect a project, particularly in such an emotive way, is a sensitive matter that requires care and patience. Once our hands were busy, I found that conversations happened without pressure. People opened up to me about the project’s impact. The main themes that came up were ‘community and belonging’, ‘empowerment and opportunities’, ‘tradition and transferal of skills’ and ‘health, grief and neurodivergence’.

When I started my role, there was a lot of “this is what we want… but we’re not sure what that looks like yet”. As with any community-led project, community members must be kept at the helm, steering their own story; I was there to offer myself and my skills as storytelling tools. One of the key outputs outlined in the brief was a ‘creative installation’ to be showcased at the celebration event, co-designed with community members. To ensure the installation reflected the project and the people, I attended subgroup meetings to discuss how we could use my skills to tell the story of ‘Squares’.

The group had already explored the idea of a ‘gift tag’ tree to accompany the main display at the celebration event, featuring labels that shared information about the people who contributed to the project. I worked closely with members of the subgroup to design the labels and distribute them within the community. This was a stretch moment for me, but it allowed me to develop new skills and taught me the importance of leaning on others for support, sharing skills and asking for help.

Once the gift tags were printed, the subgroup made an effort to distribute them far and wide. Everyone seemed spurred to contribute to things when we asked for help, which was a recurring theme throughout the project. Despite this, only fifteen gift tags were returned. This was as expected, given that community members were hesitant to provide written feedback in previous projects. Despite this, those who did felt valued when asked to contribute and showed their gratitude.

The installation had a positive impact at the celebration event, as people commented on how lovely it was to read about the friendships formed through the project.

We also needed a supplementary outlet to showcase at the event, to feature additional feedback and involve the wider community. Discussions with the subgroup and other community members at one of the Blackwell drop-in sessions birthed the idea of writing a community Christmas song, putting feedback to the tune of 'O Christmas Tree', so that all guests at the showcase event could sing along.

The feedback was gathered through pressure-free writing activities held alongside the usual drop-in activities, since we agreed that we'd likely catch more people this way than we might with a traditional creative writing workshop. Some community members wrote entire songs, others contributed a verse, a line or a word. I filled any gaps with feedback gathered from conversations had throughout my tenure.

We ended up with lots of verses, but in conversations with the subgroup, we decided that it was important to retain the integrity of the song to reflect the project's impact, even if it meant singing seven verses at the celebration event! The core members of the group complimented the 'magic' of the song and took joy in pointing out their lines. It was a unique storytelling device that was accessible and inclusive, that didn't rely on people making a conscious decision to engage. Integrating the feedback with the event in this way meant that people heard, read, saw, sang and felt the project's impact in a way that could not have been achieved with a more concrete installation.

Feedback from the subgroup about the creative capture element of the project was largely positive. Members were grateful for an extra layer of expression that empowered them to try things that they wouldn't have otherwise. They noted that they liked having a Creative Catcher who 'got stuck in' and other participants expressed feeling valued and appreciated being asked for input.

"The project has empowered me to do my own craft and fundraising projects."

"It has provided respite to people who are supporting unwell family members."

"This project has been a lifeline."

A 'Squares' O Christmas Tree
Written by community members.

1

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Hours and hours of our time.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Thousands of squares in their prime.
This patchwork project feels like home,
Reminds us we are not alone.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Hours and hours of our time.

2

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Your branches tell our story.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
stitched with muscle memory.
All our knowledge handed down,
Every square, we made it count.
O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree,
Your branches tell our story.

3

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Pick up the stitches, elbows in.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Empower us to do our thing.
Stitching is a ritual,
Our methods are traditional.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Pick up the stitches, elbows in.

4

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Keep us stitching one, two, three.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Bacon butties, cups of tea.
Send more work and we'll be glad,
Keep us feeling 'happy sad'.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Keep us stitching one, two, three.

This page was taken from the Community Celebration Event handout.

5

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Greater Creative makes us proud.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
In Newton, Blackwell, all around.
Hilcote glows with lights so bright,
Westhouses' tree lights up the night.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Greater Creative makes us proud.

6

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Thanks to all who helped us here.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
'Squares' is a project we hold dear.
What will we do now that we're done?
We hope that there will be more fun.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Thanks to all who helped us here.

7

O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
All applaud when we walk in.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
Next year's work will soon begin.
Let's make a wish as it draws near,
For this year's work, we give a cheer.
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
All applaud when we walk in.

Thank you!
To the community and to all contributors who gifted their time, skills and materials to Squares. Squares has been a community project powered by Greater Creative.

Greater Creative is a community collective. Our work is informed by the community and led by our working party of Blackwell Parish residents. The programme is facilitated by local community arts organisation Platform Thirty1.

The Impact

Community, belonging and friendships

Almost every single gift tag stated ‘community’ and ‘friendship’ as something gained from the project. This was an unsurprising outcome, considering the nature of the conversations I have had with people at the drop-in sessions and events. It was interesting to see how people sit within that sense of belonging; I spoke to people who have lived in Blackwell Parish for years, but said it didn’t feel like home until getting involved with Greater Creative projects.

Community spirit was also expressed in actions. Everyone rallied around to make sure things got done; people volunteered to do their bit at the celebration event; the group decided to write a song that everyone could sing along to. It certainly had the intended impact, as members of the wider community commented on how nice it was to hear and read about the friendships made.

Female empowerment and opportunities

Multiple community members shared their experiences of feeling empowered to seek out new personal and professional opportunities through their involvement with ‘Squares’ and other Greater Creative projects. We talked a lot about crafting as a viable business venture for women, rather than a necessity, as tradition would dictate. One of the younger female community members has used the skills she developed through ‘Poppies’ to start her own crochet business and is being commissioned by Platform Thirty1 to design the packs for the next project.

Community members expressed feeling ‘empowered to do their thing’ and took ownership of the project, making decisions and sharing ideas for the future. There was a sense of apprehension as the project neared its end. On the last drop-in session, I asked how everyone was feeling and was told, “There’ll be a moment of relief when it’s done, then it’s straight onto the next,” and, “I’ll need to find something to keep me busy”.

Health and neurodivergence

Conversations often turned to the project’s impact on physical and mental health. One participant described the project as a ‘lifeline’ that helped her through mental health struggles and the menopause, noting the camaraderie and support from others as a particular benefit.

In a discussion with a neurodivergent participant, I was told, “My idea of relaxing is not relaxing [...] The project has given me something to do with my hands while watching TV”.

Tradition and skill transferal

Community members told me about feeling motivated to get involved to feel closer to family members, both alive and passed. Some donated materials and unfinished projects so that their loved ones' memories could still be part of the story. Some contributed using the skills passed down to them by their own mothers and grandmothers. One person told me that she hopes to keep the tradition alive and even runs a knitting club at a local school.

Another community member learned to knit because her granddaughter saw 'Squares' happening at Newton Community Centre and asked her to teach her. She hadn't knitted for fifty years, so re-learned and ended up contributing multiple squares to the project. This was an interesting story because it is almost working backwards from the norm. It seemed like the majority were keeping a tradition going, whereas this person started a new one to bond with her granddaughter. She quoted her own grandma, "I can't never do anything".

Bereavement

The social aspect was also named as a crutch for people experiencing grief; one participant wrote, "I have recently retired and was bereaved. I needed to connect with other people and socialise" as their 'something gained'. Another told me, "It has helped me through getting used to my new normal after the loss of my husband and mother". The project was also applauded as an outlet for people caring for unwell family members, who participated from home.

Some told me that participating in the project helped them feel closer to loved ones who had passed away. Some people kept their loved ones alive by donating their yarn, tools and unfinished projects, allowing them to remain part of the story.

"It's helped me through my health problems."

"I've met people who I wouldn't have otherwise."

"The group is incredibly supportive."