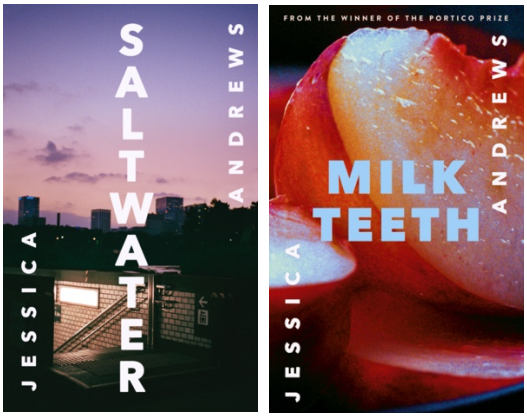
It Begins with Our Bodies

Embodied depictions of social class within innovative contemporary British and Irish literary fiction



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Declaration

I, Jessica Andrews, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This submission is composed of my two published novels, *Saltwater* and *Milk Teeth*, and an accompanying thesis. The critical component addresses my innovative use of form, structure and language to create an 'affective bodily economy' or a 'language of the body' within my novels.

Both *Saltwater* and *Milk Teeth* follow millennial, working-class women growing up in the north-east of England in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in the shadow of de-industrialisation, amidst false promises of neoliberalism. Both characters attempt social mobility, and their class transgressions cause psychological fragmentation. They experience class and gender-inflicted shame as physical sensation, resulting in hyper-awareness of their bodies. I articulate this embodied experience of social class through the formal and stylistic devices used in my novels to represent a classed, gendered, 'language of the body'.

My critical thesis examines my use of form, structure and language in *Saltwater* and *Milk Teeth* to express this somatic articulation of class and gender shame. I consider Eimear McBride's use of embodied language to represent the effects of socio-political, religious and physical violence in her first two novels, *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* and *The Lesser Bohemians*. I discuss the ways in which my novels build on McBride's techniques by constructing my own bodily lexicon and affective emotional architecture to convey the indirect effects of class and gender oppression. My work demonstrates an original contribution to knowledge through my novelistic depiction of somatic experience to address class and gender-inflicted shame.

Critical thesis

It Begins with Our Bodies:
Embodied depictions of social class
within innovative contemporary British and Irish literary fiction

Introduction

My novels, *Saltwater*[1] and *Milk Teeth*,[2] propose a 'language of the body' or an 'affective bodily economy'[3] to convey the somatised experience of class and gender-inflicted shame. Both novels are told through autodiegetic narration, as a means of articulating millennial working-class womanhood. The working-class women in my novels experience class and gender-inflicted shame somatically. Therefore, my novels use autodiegetic narration alongside innovative form, structure and language to create a sensory reading experience, making my readers aware of their own bodies, mimicking my protagonists' experiences of the world.

Due to the London-centric nature of the publishing industry and the historic elitism of the literary world, working-class characters and writers are often under-represented.[4] Isabel Waidner defines 'innovation' in literature as formal, linguistic and inter-disciplinary experimentation which challenges literary conventions. They make links between literary experiment and DIY subcultures, often produced by marginalised writers working outside of traditional literary culture. They state, 'widening participation in literature also requires a critical engagement with literary form. The writing itself has to transgress the various structures through which the avant-garde literary canon has perpetuated itself and its exclusiveness'.[5] My

[1] Jessica Andrews, *Saltwater* (Sceptre, 2019). References to this primary source will take the form of in-text citations.
[2] Jessica Andrews, *Milk Teeth* (Sceptre, 2022). References to this primary source will take the form of in-text citations.
[3] Chloé Ashbridge, 'All I Need is Myself: Spatializing Neoliberal Class Consciousness in the Northern Millennial Novel', in *Locating Classed Subjectivities: Intersections of Space and Working-Class Life in Nineteenth, Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century British Writing,* ed. by Simon Lee (Routledge, 2022). pp 206-222. (p. 208).
[4] 'An Open Letter to the London-Centric Publishing Industry', Northern Fiction Alliance (2018) <http://northernfictionalliance.com/news/an-open-letter-to-the-london-centric-publishing-industry/> [20.02.2025].
[5] Isabel Waidner, *Liberating the Canon: An Anthology of Working-Class Literature* (Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2018). p.3.

use of autodiegetic narration alongside formal and linguistic innovation to formulate a 'language of the body' is a means of finding a literary language which allows my working-class characters to tell their own stories, on their own terms.

My first novel, *Saltwater,* follows the story of Lucy, a young, white, millennial woman from Sunderland, growing up in a working-class family, amidst Thatcherite legacies of de-industrialisation. On a personal level, she navigates complex family dynamics, including her father's alcoholism and her younger brother's deafness. The novel is focused on Lucy's relationship with her mother. The two are bound together by their particular challenging circumstances, then pulled apart by Lucy's decision to move to London to attend an elite university, and the distance her subsequent class transgression creates between them. Lucy wants to leave her past behind through education and her relocation to the capital. However, her working-class background makes it difficult for her to assimilate to the middle-class, metropolitan culture she encounters there. During Lucy's university graduation, her father goes missing in London, forcing her to address her history and sense of belonging. She moves to her grandfather's house in Donegal, where she reflects on her childhood and attempts to piece her fractured identity together. On a wider, socio-political level, *Saltwater* articulates the affective experience of working-class womanhood during the early 2000s, excavating the physical and psychological cost of social mobility.

Saltwater is told in short, non-chronological fragments, composed of three intersecting timelines. These include an account of Lucy's childhood in Sunderland, her young adulthood in London and her experiences in Donegal. There are also lyrical sections addressed from daughter to mother, told in a fragmented bodily lexicon. The innovative, non-linear structure of this novel reflects Lucy's splintered psyche, caused by the loss of her working-class

community. My unconventional use of form mimics associative, sensory memory, foregrounding embodied experience.

My second novel, *Milk Teeth*, is told from the perspective of an unnamed protagonist who grows up in County Durham, then moves between London, Paris and Barcelona, in search of art, experience and access to a middle-class world. The novel explores the ways in which she learns to deny her physical and emotional needs in pursuit of 'poetry and magic' (69), affective components of social mobility which she does not have the language to fully understand or articulate.

The novel is structured through two intersecting timelines. The present-tense timeline follows my protagonist's romantic relationship in Barcelona during her late twenties, where experiences of food, sex and desire in the present force her to confront the denial and repression which shaped her past, as a result of her gender and working-class background. The past-tense timeline details memories of class and bodily shame, excavating the ways my protagonist blames herself for the effects of class and gender inequality, resulting in paradoxical feelings of embodiment and disembodiment. *Milk Teeth* uses heightened sensory language to highlight the ways in which my protagonist attempts to escape her body through denial of her physical needs, and yet finds it everywhere, as a symbol of her class and gender shame, mitigating her experience of the world.

My thesis examines the innovative techniques I use in my novels to depict these experiences of millennial, working-class women, in particular the ways in which class and gender inequality are experienced at the level of the body. In Part One, I articulate an embodied understanding of social class by situating my work within a socio-political, theoretical and

literary context. Firstly, I discuss the implications of winning the Portico Prize for *Saltwater* in 2020, and how this impacted my own identity as a northern writer. I consider my use of an 'affective bodily economy'[6] or 'language of the body' to further representations of working-class womanhood through the novel form. My work examines the visibility of northern, working-class writers within contemporary literary fiction, situating my work within a lineage and raising questions about accessibility to the arts for working-class people.

My novels are framed through key socio-political events by defining regional identity and social class within a millennial context, situated in the north-east of England. I critique the false promises of social mobility purported by Tony Blair's New Labour during the 1990s, with reference to Pierre Bordieu's concept of 'habitus clivé'.[7] By examining the effects of political austerity in the UK in the wake of the 2007 financial crash, and the subsequent shift in attitudes towards working-class people, I shed light on the demonisation of working-class women's bodies by the tabloid media.

My thesis discusses the ways in which these political tensions are linked to the representation of working-class women's bodies in my novels. I address my use of physical uncleanliness to represent class-inflicted shame, alongside my protagonists' uses of disembodiment and denial as misdirected attempts at 'escaping' their circumstances and 'improving' themselves. I present my focus on individual working-class characters as a means of connecting to a wider understanding of the working-class, female experience, through the lens of Sara Ahmed's work

[6] Chloé Ashbridge, 'All I Need is Myself: Spatializing Neoliberal Class Consciousness in the Northern Millennial Novel', in *Locating Classed Subjectivities: Intersections of Space and Working-Class Life in Nineteenth, Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century British Writing,* ed. by Simon Lee (Routledge, 2022). pp 206-222. (p. 208).
[7] Pierre Bordieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

on affect.[8] Part One of my thesis therefore provides a clear context for my intentions in representing working-class women's bodies through innovative literary devices.

In Part Two, I outline the ways in which this embodied understanding of social class affects the form, structure and language of my novels. This includes an interrogation of Eimear McBride's use of embodied language in *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*[9] and *The Lesser Bohemians*[10] to articulate gender-based shame and religious oppression within the context of Irish identity in the 1980s and 1990s. I consider the ways my own work draws from and builds on these ideas by representing an embodied experience of working-class womanhood within millennial Britain during the late 1990s and early 2000s to articulate class and gender-inflicted shame.

Through an examination of McBride's use of fragmented narrative structure to depict personal and political trauma, I make links to my own use of fragmentation to represent the socio-political and psychological fracturing experienced by my protagonists. I present my own use of fragmented structure as an associative emotional architecture, allowing the reader to use inference or emotional logic to understand the story, using a structural emotive 'language of the body'. I discuss McBride's use of fragmented language to articulate the *direct* effects of physical violence. I also examine the ways in which my own work utilises a fragmented bodily lexicon to build an affective emotional architecture to explore the *indirect* consequences of state violence and inequality.

[8] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014).
[9] Eimear McBride, *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (Faber, 2014). References to this primary source will take the form of in-text citations.
[10] Eimear McBride, *The Lesser Bohemians* (Faber, 2016). References to this primary source will take the form of in-text citations.

I consider McBride's use of embodied language to capture emotive, embodied experience, and the ways in which the violence enacted upon her protagonists causes paradoxical disembodiment and re-embodiment. I outline the ways in which my own novels further these ideas through the symbolic nature of my protagonists' bodies, which become vehicles for their shame. They attempt to distance themselves from their bodies through drinking, sex, denial and repression, resulting in a heightened focus on the body and triggering re-embodiment. I discuss McBride's representation of embodiment and disembodiment through language, and my own use of visceral, sensory language which positively foregrounds the body, as a means of resisting shame and silence provoked by classed, patriarchal, neoliberal society.

Through an examination of the somatic implications of class and gender inequality, my thesis demonstrates an original contribution to knowledge by exemplifying the ways in which my novels draw on pre-existing literature and theoretical ideas to construct an embodied language. My innovative use of form and language makes a significant contribution to literary representations of gender and social class by conceptualising millennial, working-class womanhood as a bodily experience within the novel.

Part One: An Embodied Understanding of Working-Class Womanhood

i) Regional identity and social class within millennial Britain

My debut novel, *Saltwater* won the Portico Prize in 2020, awarded by the Portico Library in Manchester to new works that 'best evoke the spirit of the North of England'.[11] Journalist Anita

[11] 'About the Portico Prize', The Portico Library (2021) < https://www.theportico.org.uk/portico-prize> [20.02.25].

Sethi profiled each of the shortlisted writers, including myself, for the *Guardian,* asking questions such as, 'Why is the Portico Prize necessary? Do writers in the north have to work harder to get published? Is there a 'northern aesthetic?''. As CEO and chief librarian Thom Keep notes, 'There's a definite problem in the London-centric nature of the [publishing] industry and we're still in that rut. Politically it's never been more the case – there's a fundamental disconnect with the north'.[12]

Literary representations of the north are often synonymous with working-class culture, due to the prevalence of former industrial towns and cities in the region, the political and economic north-south divide, and the London-centric nature of the arts, highlighting the importance of regional prizes such as the Portico, which increase visibility for writers outside of the capital. I grew up in Sunderland and moved to London at eighteen, as the first person in my family to go to university. I believed I had 'sacrificed' my northern identity by leaving my northern, working-class community behind, in search of different opportunities. Winning the prize and gaining recognition as a northern writer allowed me to lay claim to those facets of my identity. It also raised important questions for myself about why I had previously believed that I must leave those parts of myself behind.

In her review of *Saltwater,* Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett writes, '[It] features something very rare in literary fiction: a working-class heroine, written by a young, working-class author'.[13] Due to the historic elitism of the literary world, depictions of working-class life within British culture are often marginal. In his analysis of data on publishing trends, Chris McCrudden notes that the publishing industry often acts as, 'an upper-middle class industry whose output caters

[12] Anita Sethi, 'Northern writers on why a north-specific prize is more important than ever', The Guardian (2020) < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jan/12/north-south-divide-portico-prize-2020-shortlist-interviews-myers-adelle-stripe-caveney-jessica-andre> [20.02.2025].
[13] Rhiannon Lucy Coslett, 'Saltwater by Jessica Andrews review', The Guardian (2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/01/saltwater-jessica-andrews-review> [20.02.25].

to upper-middle class tastes.'[14] This exclusivity is linked to Waidner's call for a re-evaluation of the definitions of 'literature' and 'culture' in order to be truly representative. They write, 'change literature and the discipline will diversify. Diversify the discipline and the literature itself will change'.[15] In a 2016 study, Dr Dave O'Brien estimates that merely 10% of authors and translators have parents who work in routine or manual labour,[16] drawing connections between industry output and the class backgrounds of the people who make decisions. The north-south divide is a key issue here, linked to the disparity in investment, infrastructure, education and political autonomy.[17] In 2018, the Northern Fiction Alliance published a letter asking the industry to diversify its authors, stating how, 'white, middle-class and London-centric our industry still is.'[18]

In recent years, there has been a drive to increase access to publishing by setting up Hachette offices in regional cities, alongside the success of initiatives such as HarperNorth in Manchester; however, the lack of government investment in the north means there is still a vast north-south divide. In 2020, Professor Katy Shaw authored the *Common People* report, interviewing emerging working-class writers about barriers to the publishing industry they

[14] Kit de Waal, 'Make room for working class writers', The Guardian (2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/10/kit-de-waal-where-are-all-the-working-class-writers-> [20.02.25].
[15] Isabel Waidner, *Liberating the Canon: An Anthology of Working-Class Literature* (Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2018). p.3.
[16] Dave O Brien, Daniel Laurison, Andrew Miles and Sam Friedman, 'Are the creative industries meritocratic? An analysis of the 2014 British Labour Force Survey', *Cultural Trends,* 25. 2 (2016) (pp.116-31) doi:10.1080/09548963.2016.1170943.
[17] See: Peter Hetherington, 'The north of England has high hopes for this government. Why is it only offering us crumbs from the south?', The Guardian (2025) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/feb/16/north-of-england-labour-north-south-divide-tyne-bridge> [28.04.25].
Andy Burnham, 'Westminster be warned – Britain's future will be decided in the north. Get on the right side of that', The Guardian (2025) < https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/feb/27/westminster-britain-future-north-england> [28.04.25].
Sally Weale, 'Education secretary warns of 'baked-in' inequality in English school system', The Guardian (2024) <https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/aug/13/education-secretary-warns-of-baked-in-inequality-in-english-school-system> [28.04.25].
[18] 'An Open Letter to the London-Centric Publishing Industry', Northern Fiction Alliance (2018) <http://northernfictionalliance.com/news/an-open-letter-to-the-london-centric-publishing-industry/> [20.02.2025].

have faced, as a move towards increasing accessibility for those from working-class and diverse backgrounds. The report identifies five key barriers which limit access, including imposter syndrome, a lack of peer support, industry networks and role models, alongside issues of gatekeeping and the tokenistic nature of some diversity schemes run by agencies and publishers. Of course, barriers faced by northern and working-class writers begin with childhood education, reflected in the education attainment gap between the north and south. 2023 saw the largest gap on record between top GCSE grades awarded to pupils in London and those in the north-east. Regional education network Schools North East attributed the disparity to 'the disproportionate impact of the pandemic, and the failure of government 'catch-up' policies to impact on the most deprived regions.'[19] Shaw's findings draw on Mike Savage, whose research into contemporary definitions of social class 'underlines a persistent 'class ceiling' whereby personal background continues to inhibit individuals from reaching the top of their industry – if they even make it into the industry in the first place.'[20] Cosslett's recognition of my depiction in *Saltwater* of a life which is 'rare' within literary fiction attests to this social inequality, deepened by the north-south divide, affecting education, aspiration and access to art and culture.

Traditional working-class stories which do gain mainstream appeal often focus on masculine depictions of labour and the industrial landscape. Popular novels such as, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* by Alan Sillitoe,[21] *Kestrel for a Knave* by Barry Hines[22] and *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh[23] follow the lives of

[19] Richard Adams and Sally Weale, 'Record north-south gap in top GCSE grades blamed on 'London-centric policies', The Guardian (2023) < https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/24/record-north-south-gap-in-top-gcse-grades-blamed-on-london-centric-policies> [08.03.25].
[20] Katy Shaw, *Common People: Breaking the Class Ceiling in UK Publishing* (New Writing North, Writing West Midlands and Northumbria University, 2020). p.13.
[21] Allan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (W.H. Allen, 1958) and *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (W.H. Allen, 1959).
[22] Barry Hines, *Kestrel for a Knave* (Michael Joseph, 1968).
[23] Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (Secker and Warburg, 1993).

disenfranchised young white men within the context of economic hardship, factory work, prison, drugs and violence. As Nick Hubble observes, depictions of working-class life in the 1970s, formed 'a culture and structure of feeling that principally empowered white working-class men…and marginalised both women and non-white postwar immigrants from the Commonwealth.' [24] The prevalence of white men and subsequent marginalisation of women, transgender and non-binary identities and people of colour within representations of working-class experience persists today.

While northern, working-class heroines within contemporary literary fiction may be less numerous and visible than their male counterparts, they do exist. *Union Street* by Pat Barker[25] conveys an embodied depiction of working-class women's lives in Newcastle, and bestselling memoir *Once in a House on Fire* by Andrea Ashworth[26] details harrowing physical abuse in elevated, lyrical prose, following the author's childhood and adolescence in 1970s Manchester. Gwendoline Riley's early work, including *Cold Water* and *Sick Notes*[27] depict the young, northern, female, working-class experience with bleakness and brutality, married with poetic imagery. In 2019, Kit de Waal published the *Common People* anthology,[28] celebrating northern, working-class women writers such as Adelle Stripe, Julie Noble, Jenny Knight, Louise Powell, Jill Dawson and Anita Sethi, contributing to timely discourse on the role of class within contemporary literary culture, coinciding with the publication of my first novel in the same month of that year.

[24] Nick Hubble, 'Respectability, Nostalgia and Shame in Contemporary English Working-Class Fiction', *Working-Class Writing,* (2018) (pp. 269-287) doi:10.1007/978-3-319-96310-5_14.
[25] Pat Barker, *Union Street* (Virago, 1982).
[26] Andrea Ashworth, *Once in a House on Fire* (Picador, 1998).
[27] Gwendoline Riley, *Cold Water* (Jonathan Cape, 2002) and *Sick Notes* (Jonathan Cape, 2004).
[28] *Common People: An Anthology of Working-Class Writers* ed. By Kit de Waal (Unbound, 2019).

My novels have roots in such accounts of northern, female, working-class identity, which often draw from lived experience. Yet, my work endeavours to further literary representation of this experience through my focus on millennial womanhood and my embodied depiction of social class. De Waal states that working-class stories often focus on the plight of a character who leaves humble beginnings to create a more affluent, successful, middle-class life for themselves. She writes, 'this squashes the multiplicity of working-class experience into a few standard tropes: the misery memoir, the escape, the clever boy or girl "done good."'[29] My own fiction seeks to demonstrate the myth of social mobility within neoliberal society for working-class women by deliberately subverting this trope. Initially, both of my novels follow the *bildungsroman* tradition of characters wishing to escape their circumstances, yet they learn this does not bring them the success or happiness they were promised. These trajectories critique meritocratic ideals which place the onus on the individual to transform their own lives. Meritocracy neglects the psychic fracture and loss of identity individual class mobility can cause, instead of working towards systemic change which could improve conditions for working-class people, meaning they would not have to look elsewhere for the things they need. As a result of leaving their homes and families, the protagonists of both my novels experience a psychic and emotional fracture. Due to class inequality, they cannot fully assimilate into middle-class society. The shame and self-loathing they feel is experienced at the level of their bodies as a physical sensation, represented in my novels through formal, stylistic and linguistic choices which serve to illuminate the failures of neoliberal meritocracy within contemporary Britain. My use of this term is concerned with the sociological impacts of political-economic

[29] Kit de Waal, 'Make room for working class writers', The Guardian (2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/10/kit-de-waal-where-are-all-the-working-class-writers-> [20.02.25].

theories of neoliberalism[30] and the ways in which these shape subjectivities.[31] I borrow from Jo Littler's definition of meritocracy which states, 'whatever your social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity for 'talent' to combine with 'effort' in order to 'rise to the top'. She argues, 'the 'fair' neoliberal meritocratic dream rests on the idea of a level playing field, conveniently ignoring systemic inequality'[32] and this view of neoliberal meritocracy informs my own position.

Chloé Ashbridge writes about my embodied depiction of social class in *Saltwater,* discerning a representation of class inequality through bodily feeling, which she terms as an 'affective bodily economy'. She writes that *Saltwater* articulates 'an affective experience of mobility that is particular to the dematerialized conditions of class and labour under neoliberalism.'[33] Drawing on Rebecca Coleman's work on austerity's affective economy, which reads financial precarity through bodily feeling, recognising the role of emotion in power relations,[34] Ashbridge proposes that my work demonstrates 'how the cultural conditions of class are experienced in and through the body'. She describes *Saltwater*'s focus on the body as a means of articulating working-class experience which is closely linked to neoliberal subjectivity, demonstrating the ways in which my exploration of 'educational, spacial, cultural and class

[30] David Harvey's definition of neoliberalism is: 'a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills characterised by strong private property rights, free market and free trade.' See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford University Press, 2007). p.2.
[31] Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval consider the implications of neoliberal ideology on subjectivity as: 'each individual must work at their own efficiency, at intensifying their own effort…the subject is therewith enjoined to conform internally to this image by constant self-work or self-improvement.' See Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, 'The New Way of the World Part I: Manufacturing the Neoliberal Subject'. *e-flux journal*, 51 (2014) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/51/59958/the-new-way-of-the-world-part-i-manufacturing-the-neoliberal-subject/> [18.04.25].
[32] Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (Routledge, 2017) p.1.
[33] Chloé Ashbridge, 'All I Need is Myself: Spatializing Neoliberal Class Consciousness in the Northern Millennial Novel', in *Locating Classed Subjectivities: Intersections of Space and Working-Class Life in Nineteenth, Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century British Writing,* ed. by Simon Lee (Routledge, 2022). pp 206-222. (p. 208).
[34] Rebecca Coleman, 'Austerity Futures: Debt, Temporality and (Hopeful) Pessimism as an Austerity Mood' *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics* (2016) 87. 87. pp. 83-10. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.87.5.2016.> [29.04.25].

inequalities' are 'written on and experienced through the body'.[35] Her conceptualisation of class and gender inequality through the body in my work is resonant with my own search for a 'language of the body' as a means of articulating class and gender shame through the novel form.

This relationship between the physical emotions felt by an individual working-class body and a collective understanding of working-class experience can be better understood through Sara Ahmed's work on emotion. In *Affective Economies*, she examines the ways that emotions circulate between bodies and bind us together, linking individual affective experiences and collective identities. She writes, 'within affective economies, emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments'.[36] Here, Ahmed shows that individual emotions connect us to wider socio-political issues and identities. From this perspective, the bodily language of emotions experienced by my protagonists has the ability to attach (and separate) them from a collective working-class identity. My novels put these ideas into practice by examining the somatic, affective experience of bodily emotion felt by individual characters, contributing to wider representations of women and working-class identities. Ahmed's exploration of the ways in which emotions affect individual bodies, which then go on to form collective identities, provides a background for my demonstration of the ways in which class and gender inequality impact psychological and physiological selfhood, as a wider critique of meritocratic neoliberalism. My protagonists experience heightened emotions and bodily sensations at the level of the individual, as they navigate classed, patriarchal society. This depiction of somatic

[35] Chloé Ashbridge, 'All I Need is Myself: Spatializing Neoliberal Class Consciousness in the Northern Millenial Novel', in *Locating Classed Subjectivities: Intersections of Space and Working-Class Life in Nineteenth, Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century British Writing,* ed. by Simon Lee (Routledge, 2022). pp 206-222. (p. 212).
[36] Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text,* 22. 2. (2004) pp. 117-139. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55780> [18.04.25].

experience is a mode of reflecting and refracting the ways in which working-class women's bodies are conceptualised within neoliberal society, as a means of connecting to wider issues of class and gender identity for millennial women living within capitalist patriarchy. Conducive to my depiction of an 'affective bodily economy', or embodied class and gender experience, through a 'language of the body', it is important to provide context for my exploration of class and gender within a millennial context, rooted in the north-east of England.

ii) The myth of meritocracy

The young women in my novels are sold the myth of meritocracy by those in power, which states that working-class people have the power to attain social mobility and transform their own lives through individual hard work. Yet, they find themselves in underpaid bar jobs, neglected shopping centres and precarious housing, navigating scarcity and austerity. They grow up in ex-colliery villages with absent centres, internalising the demonisation of working-class bodies they see in politics and the media, turning class hatred upon themselves. They absorb neoliberal, individualistic messaging, believing they must work hard to change themselves and their bodies, bettering their circumstances and leaving their communities behind.

The autodiegetic narrators of both *Saltwater* and *Milk Teeth* are young white women from the north-east of England, born in the early 1990s and coming of age in the new millennium. Like myself, they must navigate legacies of de-industrialisation, Thatcherism and New Labour's broken promises, amid political austerity. By the 1990s, like many post-industrial towns and cities across the UK, Sunderland, Durham, Newcastle and Middlesbrough had been decimated by the closure of the mines and shipyards, without any existing adequate welfare state or

suitable economic support to provide alternative livelihoods.[37] Historic markers of working-class identity, such as stable employment and strong trade unions were weakened in the wake of the Miners' Strike of 1984-5.[38] As Nathalie Olah notes, Tony Blair's historic Labour landslide victory in the 1997 general election ushered in a period of false optimism for working-class people, as his vision of 'Cool Britannia' capitalised on the desire for change. Olah describes Margaret Thatcher's plan to erode support for working-class people under her rule as, 'a technique devised to incentivise greater social mobility.'[39] Under the guise of creating a more equitable society, Blair, MP for Sedgefield in County Durham and educated at the fee-paying Durham Chorister School, monopolised on Thatcher's legacy. He emphasised accessibility to higher education as a means of pushing a neoliberal agenda that placed the onus for social change on the individual, while failing to address systemic problems.

Blair's New Labour ideals triggered a societal shift, symbolised by the seminal image of the new prime minister shaking hands with Noel Gallagher at a Downing Street party in 1997. Oasis' manager, Alan McGee, reportedly donated £50,000 to the Labour Party in the run-up to the election, marrying neoliberal beliefs with popular culture.[40] Blairite reforms led to an economic boom and a thriving media industry. Working-class celebrities like Oasis, The Spice Girls, David Beckham and Tracey Emin gained increasing visibility within mainstream television, newspapers and magazines.[41] Their success made working-class people believe they

[37] See Luke Telford, 'There is nothing there: Deindustrialisation and loss in a coastal town' *Competition & Change.* 26. 2. (2021) pp.197-214. doi:10.1177/10245294211011300.
[38] Arthur Scargill, 'We could surrender – or stand and fight' The Guardian (2009) <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/mar/07/arthur-scargill-miners-strike> [15.04.25].
[39] Nathalie Olah, *Steal As Much As You Can: How to Win the Culture Wars in the Age of Austerity* (Repeater Books, 2019) pp. 23 and 40-41.
[40] 'Labour to Get Help from Man Behind Oasis', Scottish Herald (1997) <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12332465.labour-get-help-from-the-man-behind-oasis/> [18.04.25].
[41] See: 'London Swings! Again!' Vanity Fair (1997) <https://archive.vanityfair.com/article/1997/3/london-swings-again> [19.04.25].
'The Spice Girls: Fox Force Five' The Face (1996) <https://theface.com/music/the-spice-girls-interview-wannabe-25-year-anniversary-music-victoria-beckham-geri-halliwell> [19.04.25].

too could achieve wealth and fame, if they worked hard enough. Blair's promises 'to break down the barriers that hold people back, to create real upward mobility, a society that is genuinely open and based on merit and the equal worth of all'[42] oversimplified complex problems of social inequality, putting pressure on individuals to transform their circumstances, instead of making systemic changes to improve conditions for working-class people. Blair viewed education as 'social justice, liberty and opportunity'[7] and his deputy John Prescott made a commitment to 'levelling up' the north through Regional Development Agencies, which aimed to provide economic development and regeneration to regions affected by deindustrialisation.[43] These promises heralded an era of false hope, in which working-class culture was celebrated, yet working people became trapped within a false meritocracy. The myth stated that working-class people had the power to attain better standards of living, if they, as individuals, were talented and hardworking enough.[44]

One of the weaknesses of Blair's ideology was his failure to account for regional disparity within the north. In Alex Niven's examination of the north-east's recent history, he states that one of the blind spots of Blairism was the tendency to focus on the regeneration of big cities like Manchester, instead of 'looking closely at how the North's economy and culture had been torn apart in places like County Durham – where a landscape of struggling small towns and

Julie Birchill, 'The Boy Done Good' The Guardian (2001) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/20/features.football> [19.04.25].
Fiachra Gibbons, 'Scandal Sheets Envelop Turner Prize' The Guardian (1999) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/oct/20/fiachragibbons> [19.04.25].
[42] Tony Blair, 'I want a meritocracy, not survival of the fittest', The Independent (2001) <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/i-want-a-meritocracy-not-survival-of-the-fittest-5365602.html> [08.04.25].
[43] John Prescott, 'Labour Party Conference Speech' The Guardian (1999) <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1999/sep/29/labourconference.labour9> [19.04.25].

villages was the legacy of the now departed mining industry.'[45] This neglect creates a lack of opportunity and a feeling of hopelessness, experienced firsthand by Lucy in *Saltwater*, during her childhood and young adulthood in Houghton-le-Spring, 'an old colliery town comprised of a Kwik Save, a Greggs and a library full of gory crime novels. There were a few pubs struggling under soggy St. George's flags and a park where gay couples and teenage goths got stabbed on Saturday nights' (43). She simultaneously recognises the promises purported by New Labour and the lack of investment in her hometown, describing the brutalist architecture of the nearby shopping centre as the work of, 'middle-class architects with utopian ideals.' She says, 'when that becomes your reality and you have no choice and no way out, when you're living every day under the shadow of someone else's vision it becomes oppressive, the weight of their dreams crushing the life out of you' (167). Her emotional response to this northern landscape, caused by systemic failures and class inequality, demonstrates the relationship between feeling and social politics. The concrete buildings *feel* oppressive, sucking colour and joy from the landscape, heightened by the hardships her community faces. The negative feelings these buildings evoke make it clear to Lucy that they were designed by someone outside of the community, who has never had to use them. These failures in the infrastructure of the north-east are experienced as emotion, intuited through her body as she moves through these spaces.

Lucy is a good example of the kind of aspirational working-class young person whom Blair envisioned transforming their lives through education. She wins a place at an elite university, and moves to London, where she meets a different class of artists and intellectuals. However, her engagement with middle-class society causes a deep psychological fracture, experienced as emotion and physical sensation. Pierre Bordieu's concept of 'habitus' is particularly useful when considering the embodiment of class-based dislocation and fragmentation. In his

[45] Alex Niven, *The North Will Rise Again* (Bloomsbury, 2023). p.190.

discussion of the three main forms of social capital – economic, cultural and social – Bordieu identifies the distribution of these as determining an individual's chances of social success.[46] He explores the cost of social mobility through analysis of working-class students experiencing class transition through the French education system. He argues that these class 'transfuges' experience 'pain' and 'double isolation', as a result of being trapped between social classes.[47] These working-class students attempt to integrate into middle-class society, yet they are plagued by a desire for 'reintegration into their community of origin' harbouring a 'secret guilt' for leaving their homes and families behind. Bordieu found these students were unable to enjoy their social success, as their experiences 'could never be fully shared with loved ones' who remained within their class of origin. He termed the cost of class mobility 'habitus clivé', 'torn by contradiction and internal division.'[48]

Bordieu was writing in France over forty years ago and critics have since called for a more contemporary understanding of social class, intersecting with gender, ethnic and age divisions. However, his notion of a divided 'habitus' is useful in conceptualising the psychology of my protagonists. In *Saltwater,* when Lucy first arrives in London, she works hard to erase signifiers of her working-class origins, including her north-east accent. She recalls, 'I pushed the 'ewk' out of 'bewk' with burning cheeks and taught myself to say 'buck' which rhymed with 'fuck'. I didn't want heads to turn in seminar rooms while I bungled something vague about books I hadn't had time to read, my voice clumsy and wrong' (216). Later, when she returns to Sunderland to visit her family, she realises, 'I was torn between a sense of pride that I'd gotten out and a bruised regret that I'd given it all away. It was as though I'd given up the keys to a

[46] Pierre Bordieu, 'The Forms of Capital' in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed by J.G. Robinson (Greenwood Press, 1986).
[47] Pierre Bordieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* (Stanford University Press, 1998). p.107.
[48] Pierre Bordieu, *Esquisse pour une auto-analyse* (Éditions Raisons D'Agir, 2004) p.161.

special door. I worried I would never be able to claim that gentle roughness as my own again' (242). Lucy's mother notices the distance her daughter's class transgression has put between them. She reprimands, 'you've been hard to get hold of. I don't want you to lose touch with people'. Lucy recalls, 'I felt guilty then, for stretching myself out' (243). She is becoming what Sam Friedman terms 'culturally homeless', used to describe socially mobile individuals who find themselves, 'dislocated from a recognisable cultural habitat, permanently caught with one foot in two different taste cultures', aware of their precarious position within external hierarchies of value.[49] Her 'habitus', or sense of self is divided by the distance between her new life and the people she loves, reflected in her inability to fit comfortably into either social world. This conflict is represented through her desire to change her accent, the alienation she feels upon returning to her hometown, and the guilt evoked by experiences which take her further away from her family.

In *Milk Teeth*, I complexify my presentation of social class, to consider the cost of mobility through social and cultural associations, rather than the traditional route of class transgression through education. My protagonist is not university educated, but her social status is elevated through her relationship with a middle-class academic, and her engagement with a precarious middle-class milieu of artists, writers and academics in cultural capitals of London, Paris and Barcelona. The circles she mixes in could be described as what theorist Richard Florida terms 'the creative class', denoting an emerging class of people who take on low-paid, flexible, precarious employment, to support their creative endeavours. They do not have much economic capital, yet their accrual of cultural capital ensures they remain part of the dominant class.[50] Within this world, social classification is more complex, exemplified in my protagonist's

[49] Sam Friedman, 'Cultural omnivores or culturally homeless? Exploring the shifting cultural identities of the upwardly mobile' *Poetics,* 40. 5 (2012) pp.467-489 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2012.07.001> [29.04.25].
[50] Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Hachette, 2002) p.4.

longing for *something* she believes in yet cannot name, which she believes will transform her life. Reflecting on her teenage years in her working-class community in Bishop Auckland, she says, 'I didn't want a particular job or a house or a car, anything that could be easily quantified. I wanted abstractions; a cut-glass sea with light leaking into it, burnt summer tarmac on a motorway at night' (40). She does not aspire to material or professional symbols of social mobility. Instead, she longs for vibrancy, travel and experience, characteristics which she views as an aspirational mode of living, beyond County Durham, associated with the freedoms and access to the world that an abundance of social, cultural and economic capital permits. Through the lens of Bordieu, these aspirations form part of her psychology or 'habitus'. She longs for experiences beyond the limitations of her working-class community, yet shrinks the scope of her own desires through the act of self-policing, learned as a member of the working-class.

Consequently, access to the world my protagonist longs for does not come easily. She is haunted by shame and self-loathing, experienced at the level of her body. She meets her partner's academic colleagues at a bar in Barcelona and finds herself unable to keep up with the multilingual conversation about European politics, which makes her feel 'untethered, as though I am floating somewhere outside…as though I am barely here at all' (101). She explains that she once attended an evening course in English Literature at a local college but felt nervous in seminars and found herself unable to speak. She recalls, 'my ideas were founded on emotion and connected to my own experiences, without roots in critical theory or stylistic movements, simply raging through me in bolts of anger that I couldn't always articulate; unfounded, chaotic and wild' (99). She believes that her emotional, bodily response to literature and her lack of critical vocabulary reveals the limits of her formal education, resulting in feelings of humiliation. This hierarchy of knowledge, which prioritises intellectual, rational thought over bodily instinct, is steeped within a history of marginalisation. As Beverly Skeggs observes,

'rationality is the marker of the bourgeois subject and pure emotion is seen as a threat.' She writes, 'the white female working class body is often represented as out of control, in excess…associated with the lower unruly order of bodily functions, of expulsion and leakage, which signified lack of discipline and vulgarity.'[51] The narrator of *Milk Teeth*'s shame at her response to literature in terms of emotion, rather than rational, critical thought is produced by a class hierarchy which vilifies working-class women's bodies as they navigate the world through emotion and sensation. This shame holds her back from fully participating in the conversation, limiting her access to the middle-class culture she longs to be part of.

Bordieu uses the terms 'hexis' and 'embodied cultural capital' when referring to accent, posture, mannerisms and body shape, or the ways in which individual bodies are often unconsciously presented to society. As Friedman notes, these ideas help to conceptualise the ways in which a socially mobile person's present state is formed by their past experiences. In other words, 'it explains how, even when the mobile person's conscious presentation of self may align with the subjectivities of those that mobility has brought them into contact with, elements of their bodily 'hexis' – accent, pronunciation, vocabulary, posture, taste – may always bear the trace of their class origins'.[52] Such theoretical thinking is relevant to my own depiction of what Ashbridge terms an 'affective bodily economy' and the ways in which the protagonists of my novels believe that their working-class backgrounds can be perceived physically, in their skin. They feel inadequate within middle-class society and internalise class inequality, blaming themselves for their perceived shortcomings. They believe these internal feelings manifest outwardly and can be visually perceived by others. In *Saltwater,* when Lucy starts university in London, she observes, 'Still, I am wrong. There is another kind of skin that

[51] Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (Lancaster University Press, 1997). p.86.
[52] Sam Friedman, 'The Price of the Ticket, Re-Thinking the Experience of Social Mobility', *Sociology*, 48. 2. (2014) p. 362. doi: 10.1177/003803851349035.

I did not know about. It is posh girl skin. Expensive and gold.' She views her own skin as marked in comparison: '[Their skin] is lustrous and shiny where I am mottled. Look at my bruises, my scratches, my scars. Those girls do not have these things' (216-217). Here, Lucy recognises that she has faced more difficulties than her privileged peers. Rather than attributing this to class inequality provoked by the world outside of her, Lucy internalises her class shame, believing it is physically within her and visible to others.

My novels complexify my protagonists' relationships to their bodies, families and identities as a result of the 2008 financial crash, which marked another cultural shift in attitudes towards working-class people. The economic downturn caused by political austerity was blamed on people who relied on the welfare state for survival. People on unemployment benefits were depicted as 'chavs' and 'benefit scroungers' by the media and those in power.[53] As Owen Jones writes, when workers, 'should have directed their ire at the government or their employers, they were encouraged to resent the unemployed people supposedly living it up at their expense'. The media waged a war on the working-class people it had previously celebrated. Working-class men were depicted as, 'knuckle-dragging thugs lacking legitimate aspirations'[54] and working-class women were portrayed as sexually promiscuous, undereducated and unattractive. These stereotypes were perpetuated by television programmes such as *Ladette to Lady,* a reality series which coached working-class women on skills such as accent, etiquette and flower-arranging, to become 'refined'.[55] In other words, working-class bodies were demonised. This class hatred, alongside gender inequality and the proliferation of celebrity

[53] See: Macer Hall, 'Cameron: We'll put a stop to workshy benefit scroungers' Daily Express (2008). <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/30609/Cameron-We-ll-put-a-stop-to-workshy-benefit-scroungers> [19.04.25].
John Chapman, 'Benefit Scroungers on £95,000 a year' Daily Express, (2010) <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/197820/Benefit-scroungers-on-95-000-a-year > [19.04.25].
[54] Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (Verso, 2011) p.50 and 87.
[55] Annie Lord, 'Belching, Burping and Boisterous Babes: How Ladette to Lady Defined an Era' The Independent (2020) <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/ladette-to-lady-itv-sexist-reality-tv-katie-price-kerry-katona-a9587611.html> [19.04.25].

culture through television shows like *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol* as a means of social mobility, has a crucial impact on my protagonists' relationship to their own bodies and class identities.[56] To return to Ahmed, the shame and self-loathing they experience physically can be read as a wider comment on systemic oppression and societal attitudes towards working-class women during this time. My novels focus on individual interiority as a means of addressing the ways in which constructs of gender and social class impact working-class women.

iii) Societal representations of working-class women's bodies

Writing three years before his tragic suicide in 2017, author Mark Fisher describes his own feelings of worthlessness as inextricably tied to his experience of class mobility. He writes, 'for those who from birth are taught to think of themselves as lesser, the acquisition of qualifications or wealth will seldom be sufficient to erase – either in their own minds or in the minds of others – the primordial sense of worthlessness that marks them so early in life.'.[57] This idea corresponds with the myth of social mobility which links my novels thematically. The effects of class inequality form the psychologies and selfhoods of people who are negatively impacted by them, which are impossible to escape from, even if their economic and social status may outwardly 'improve'. Furthermore, my protagonists' experience of Fisher's 'primordial sense of worthlessness' is experienced at the level of the body. The young women in my novels are faced with their own worthlessness through encounters with middle-class society, which forces them to feel aware and ashamed of their cultural and economic differences. Patriarchy objectifies women's bodies, and middle-class society deems working-

[56] Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, 'The Especially Remarkable: Celebrity and Social Mobility in Reality TV' *Mediactive: Celebrity.* 2. ed. by Jo Littler (Barefoot Publications, 2003).
[57] Mark Fisher, 'Good For Nothing' in *K-Punk* (Repeater Books, 2018). p.748.

class women's bodies in particular as abject. Therefore, my protagonists experience this worthlessness as physical shame and self-loathing, misdirected at their bodies.

The protagonist of *Milk Teeth* absorbs the media hatred of working-class bodies and consumption, learning that to demonstrate need or hunger is disgusting and shameful. She longs to escape her home in Bishop Auckland, 'far away from the strip-lit lure of kebab shops and the 2-for-1 supermarket deals and the long, acrylic fingernails scrabbling with need' (58). These markers of working-class culture repulse her, due to her internalisation of class shame. She recognises 'kebab shops' and '2-for-1 supermarket deals' as markers of working-class sustenance and wants to distance herself from them. 'Long, acrylic nails' are stereotypical examples of working-class femininity, and she equates need and hunger with class shame, demonstrating her embodiment of class-based dislocation and fragmentation.

This instance of working-class shame can be linked to the negative depiction of working-class celebrities in the media during the early 2000s, alongside middle-class notions of taste and style. As Olah observes, 'the cardinal sin of poverty had been replaced by something similar but crucially different: poor taste.'[58] The focus on 'good taste' is crucial to understanding my protagonists' ruptured relationships with their own bodies, delineated by their low social status as working-class women. In *Saltwater,* Lucy attends an elite university in London. When she gets there, she realises, 'My tongue is too thick to comprehend the taste. I am not delicate enough to understand nuance…. I am cheap things, sad things, small and unrefined' (222). Here, the sensory taste of food is used as a metaphor to address her inadequacy within middle-class notions of taste and style. Due to her working-class upbringing, Lucy has not developed

[58] Nathalie Olah, *Bad Taste* (Dialogue Books, 2023) p.4.

sophisticated culinary or cultural tastes, meaning she lacks cultural capital, unable to assimilate to the middle-class, metropolitan culture she finds herself in.

The intersection of neoliberal self-improvement and gender is evident in feminine beauty standards, which demonstrate differing beauty norms across social classes. In the north-east, both Lucy and the protagonist of *Milk Teeth* use fake tan, a stereotypically working-class beauty norm, exemplified by pop stars such as Newcastle's Cheryl Tweedy and later the cast of reality TV show *Geordie Shore.* In *Saltwater,* when Lucy moves to London and encounters middle-class beauty ideals, she finds, 'my fake tanned limbs that looked shiny and lustrous under the Newcastle club lights were orange in the sticky London sunshine.' Faced with 'effortless' middle-class beauty, she understands, for the first time, that her clothes and makeup define her as working-class.[59] She feels ashamed for falling short of middle-class beauty ideals, which leads her to, 'traipse the streets, seeking out a better version of myself' (212). She uncovers the myth of meritocracy through the intellectual and physical inadequacy she feels at university, provoking feelings of bodily shame and a renewed dedication to neoliberal self-improvement. Returning to Bordieu, her divided 'habitus' is a result of class transgression, yet the construction of gender norms is also informed by power hierarchies, which affect the control she exerts on her own body in pursuit of social mobility.

A prime example of the demonisation of working-class women's bodies through middle-class judgements of 'tastelessness' during this time period can be seen through the media portrayal of Jade Goody. A dental nurse from a council estate in Bermondsey, Goody achieved wealth and wide fame through her appearance on the 2002 series of Big Brother. The *Sun* newspaper

[59] See Jessica Andrews, 'The Line of Beauty: Where Beauty and Classism Collide' ELLE magazine (2022) < https://www.elle.com/uk/beauty/a41168078/beauty-classism/> [30.04.25].

branded her a 'pig' and she was vilified for her 'tasteless' accent, behaviour and appearance. Their campaign of hate, which printed pictures of her yawning or wearing her bikini on the cover of the newspaper, with the slogan, 'Vote out the pig' resulted in viewers gathering outside of the Big Brother television studios holding placards which read, 'Burn the Pig!'.[60] She became an abject symbol of the working-class, and public disgust was often targeted at her body, describing her as a 'hippo' and a 'fat-rolled Michelin girl'.[61] Austerity politics intentionally misdirected public vitriol at working-class people to avoid government scrutiny, and Goody's status as a woman within patriarchal society meant that her body was objectified and viewed as abject. Working-class women's bodies became symbols of laziness and overconsumption, represented as animalistic, through language such as 'hippo' and 'pig'.

A selection of tabloid magazines and newspaper headlines from this period include: 'Oh dear: 17 mortifying pictures they don't want you to see',[62] 'Kerry [Katona]: I'm so fat. Why have I let this happen again?',[63] 'Kerry's nip tuck disaster: scarred for life, granny tummy at 28. More shocking pics inside',[64] 'Jade Goody: I'm having a tummy tuck and boob lift to make my body perfect',[65] 'Kerry falls off the diet wagon again'.[66] It is worth noting that while the London-centric media world is largely middle-class, cheap tabloid magazines are marketed at working-

[60] Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (Verso, 2011) p. 377.
[61] 'Jade Goody – A Life in 10 Headlines', BBC News (2009) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7928199.stm> [26.02.25].
[62] 'Oh dear: 17 mortifying pictures they don't want you to see', Heat magazine (November 2003) <https://www.crazyaboutmagazines.com/ourshop/prod_1617691-Heat-magazine-Oh-Dear-cover-17-November-2003-Issue-243.html> [23.04.25].
[63] 'Kerry: I'm so fat. Why have I let this happen again?', OK magazine (July 2009) <https://www.ok.co.uk/celebrity-news/kerry-katona-im-so-fat-148903> [23.04.25].
[64] 'Kerry's nip tuck disaster: scarred for life, granny tummy at 28. More shocking pics inside', Reveal magazine (Jan-Feb 2009) <https://www.crazyaboutmagazines.com/ourshop/prod_334301-Reveal-magazine-Kerry-Katona-cover-31-January-6-February-2009.html> [23.04.25].
[65] 'Jade Goody: I'm having a tummy tuck and boob lift to make my body perfect', Daily Mail online (2008) <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1034049/Jade-Goody-Im-having-tummy-tuck-boob-lift-make-body-perfect.html> [23.04.25].
[66] 'Kerry falls off the diet wagon again', Reveal magazine (August-September 2010) <https://www.magazinemix.co.uk/product/reveal-magazine-abbey-clancy-nicole-scherzinger-29-aug-4-sept-2010/ > [23.04.25].

class women, while expensive, glossy fashion magazines, such as *Vogue* target the affluent classes.[67] Therefore, a working-class readership is taught that the bodies of famous, successful working-class women are abject and disgusting, leading them to police each other and themselves. When the protagonist of *Milk Teeth* encounters middle-class friends in London, she observes, 'I didn't understand their language. It was so different from the world I grew up in, where women shared Slimming World solidarity, talking in Magic Knickers and bathroom scales… the women I knew from home were proud of how little they allowed themselves to take. They admired each other's discipline, their ability to wane'. This demonstrates one of the differences in the performance of hunger and appetite across the class spectrum. The protagonist of *Milk Teeth* grows up in a feminine working-class culture where denial of food is celebrated, due to media vilification of working-class 'overconsumption'. In the world of the novel, my protagonist believes the middle-class women she meets, 'competed with each other, each girl claiming she was hungrier than the rest' (69). My working-class protagonist sees hunger as dangerous and threatening. While middle-class women certainly experience have complex relationships to food, need and the body, my protagonist's working-class background informs her own fear of need. Her class position means that she experiences economic and social precarity, meaning that her needs cannot always be fulfilled, leading her to cut herself off from them. She believes, 'it began to seem unfair as I watched my new friends enjoy their wants, rolling their hunger around their mouths and then satiating it, whereas I just wanted, all of the time' (120).

My aspirational working-class protagonists, who have grown up with the false promise of social mobility, believe they must control and monitor their bodies as a form of social

[67] Estella Tincknell, 'Always in With the In-Crowd: Vogue and The Cultural Politics of Gender, Place, Class and Taste' in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1940s-2000s*, ed. by Laurel Forster and Joanne Hollows (Edinburgh University Press, 2023). pp. 200-214.

aspiration. The narrator of *Milk Teeth* absorbs these messages from the covers of tabloid magazines. She says, 'celebrity magazines tore apart reality TV stars on the beach in their bikinis, circling their bellies in fluorescent rings of shame. *'Jade's kebab and pizza flab!'* the covers screamed at us as we queued in the newsagent for packets of Space Raiders. *'Kerry's shocker belly bulge!"* (58). She internalises the message that working-class women's bodies are tasteless, disgusting and shameful. She believes that she must control her physical appearance if she is ever to truly achieve social mobility, foreshadowing the eating disorder which develops during her teenage years. Like Lucy in *Saltwater,* she begins to view her class inadequacy as something physical, within her. Failing to recognise the systemic inequalities which inflict class oppression, these young women blame themselves for their shortcomings, mistakenly believing the size, shape and appearance of their bodies marks their class positions. This shared belief leads both of my protagonists to restrict their food intake, mistakenly believing that transforming their flesh will result in a change of material and cultural circumstances. As the protagonist of *Milk Teeth* says, 'we never dreamed of becoming doctors or lawyers or businesswomen, but we knew that beauty had the power to set us free. It was silky and spangled and a chance at something better' (57).

In *Saltwater,* Lucy is the first person in her family to go to university. She struggles with the class inequality she experiences there, ultimately graduating under the Clegg-Cameron coalition government, who famously lifted the cap on university tuition fees after pledging to abolish them to secure the youth vote, igniting the 2010 student protests and politicising a generation of young people.[68] She faces large student debt and limited job opportunities,

[68] See: Patrick Wintour, 'David Cameron: No turning back on tuition fees rise' The Guardian (2010) <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/nov/11/cameron-no-turning-back-tuition-fees-rise> [28.04.25]. Patrick Wintour and Hélène Mulholland, 'Nick Clegg apologises for tuition fees pledge', The Guardian (2012) <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/sep/19/nick-clegg-apologies-tuition-fees-pledge> [28.04.25].

attempting to navigate the housing crisis amid difficult family circumstances, resulting in the erosion of her self-esteem and aspirational dreams. She says, 'I would like to have something to believe in, but it is difficult. Everything my generation was promised got blown away like clouds of smoke curling from the ends of cigarettes in the mouths of bankers and politicians' (77). She believes that education will offer her a better life, yet finds herself adrift in London, highly educated and financially precarious with low self-esteem, unable to return to the family and working-class community in Sunderland she left behind, due to the ways in which her class transgression now marks her as different.

iv) Depictions of working-class women's bodies within my novels, *Saltwater* and *Milk Teeth*

As previously mentioned, my novels draw on Bordieu's idea that our bodies betray emotions triggered by our positions within power hierarchies, to represent the transference of class shame to bodily shame. He writes, 'emotions are all the more powerful when they are betrayed in visible manifestations such as blushing, stuttering, clumsiness, trembling, anger or impotent rage, so many ways of submitting, even despite oneself, to the dominant judgement'.[69] Here, Bordieu is describing a *direct* link between external events which produce emotions and physical manifestations. However, my own exploration of class-based shame and inadequacy is presented as physical sensation *indirectly* linked to external stimulus.

For example, in *Saltwater,* one of Lucy's first conscious experiences of class inadequacy takes place as a teenager in Durham, where she encounters affluent girls who attend a local stage school. She says, 'They toted skinny Vogue cigarettes from the cuffs of Jack Wills blazers and

[69] Pierre Bordieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. by Richard Nice (Polity, 2001) pp. 38-39.

I felt pale and dirty around them, my syllables clumsy and lumbering' (146). She recognises class difference through the expensive brands of cigarettes and clothing these girls can afford, and the sound of her own voice in comparison to theirs, correlating with Bordieu's idea that bodily signifiers can betray a lack of social capital. However, Lucy's perception of herself as 'pale and dirty' is a result of emotions which are *indirectly* linked to the physical appearances of these girls, which signify their dominant class position. Lucy is not physically dirty, but she believes that the economic, cultural and social capital these girls possess gives them a vibrancy and cleanliness that she lacks, a sentiment she will encounter repeatedly among her middle-class peers at university. The presence of these middle-class girls makes Lucy feel fragile, as if they are more physically solid than her. Through this meeting, Lucy senses the precarity of her own condition as a member of the working-class, in comparison to these girls, who seem bright, confident and secure. For Lucy, this inequality manifests as a feeling of physical uncleanliness and insubstantiality, which is an *indirect* effect of her interaction with these girls, constructed through class hierarchy, lingering beneath the surface of their communication.

However, dirt and uncleanliness can also represent the creative, middle-class lives my protagonists aspire to, complexifying physical representations of social class. For example, in *Milk Teeth*, my narrator visits her hometown of Bishop Auckland from her new life in Paris. She stays with her mother, observing, 'I felt physically dirty in her spotless house, as though the dust from the crumbling Parisian buildings and cobbled streets was caught in my hair and skin.' (186-7). In this instance, dirt signifies the bohemian, European lifestyle she desires, in contrast to her mother's clean, modern home. This contradiction can be understood through a return to Friedman's theory of a 'cultural homelessness'; she is no longer at home in either world, which manifests as physical discomfort.

During this visit, the narrator meets her teenage best friend, Tara, in a champagne bar, where she cannot afford to buy a drink, despite the accrual of cultural capital associated with glamorous, artistic Paris. Tara has recently had breast implants, and the young women discuss them. Whereas breast implants can be viewed as a means of conforming to sexual objectification by men, my working-class narrator views Tara's bodily modification as a means of taking up physical space. She is aware that Tara is at ease in her environment because she has not left her community, and therefore has not experienced acute dislocation. Tara has chosen to stay within the boundaries of her social class, which means she can afford the things she needs and wants, both economically and psychologically. My narrator observes, '[Tara] looked beautiful in a cream satin blouse, her false nails coated in glitter. I felt like a child in my scuffed boots and big denim jacket' (187). Whereas these items of clothing are a form of cultural capital in London, they make her feel child-like in Durham, preventing her from conforming to the stereotypical working-class femininity which is valued there. She takes a picture of Tara and thinks, 'I watched as she filled the screen, glossy and gorgeous with her perfect new breasts, and I felt the weight of the distance between us, all the ways in which I was shrinking, even though I thought I was expanding the parameters of my world' (189).

This intersection of gender and social class exemplifies the complexity of millennial class identity; Tara is culturally working-class, living in a working-class town and conforming to stereotypically working-class beauty ideals, yet she has a secure job and economic stability. Within working-class culture, economic stability is viewed as a form of status, and people might flaunt expensive fashion items or beauty treatments, to prove their worth. This is a form of 'conspicuous consumption', a term coined by Thorstein Veblen over a century ago. Contemporary theorists are interested in the ways in which objects are increasingly insufficient means for displaying wealth and power. Michael S. Carolan argues, 'we are progressively

striving to become the nice thing itself - to literally embody conspicuous consumption'.[70] Tara's breast implants can be read through this lens, yet my protagonist's shifting class identity complexifies this idea. She seeks a bohemian, culturally middle-class life of art and experience, where people regard the displaying of wealth as 'gauche', or 'tasteless'.[71] Due to the economic and psychological expense of living in cultural capitals like Paris and London, she learns to suppress her needs by shrinking her body, for survival. The narrator does not feel at home in Paris, or in her mother's house, or in the bar with her childhood friend, demonstrated by her conflicting feelings about her beauty and fashion choices. Again, this manifests physically, in her body. She is transforming her physical appearance, by restricting her food intake and dressing differently, so that she can fulfil middle-class beauty norms. Yet, during this interaction with Tara, she recognises that her friend does not feel the need to hide or shrink her body in shame. Her friend is comfortable in her sexuality and desirability, whereas my narrator is not, prompting her to question whether she is making the right choices. In other words, the psychological and physical cost of class mobility becomes visible to her, prompting her to question whether the sacrifices she has made are worthwhile. Rather than transforming herself into 'the nice thing itself', she shrinks her body, becoming less visible, hiding herself in shame.

Historically, patriarchal society views white, male, middle-class bodies as rational subjects, which is equated with morality. As Valerie Walkerdine et al note, rationality has historically been understood as a marker of 'civilisation' in opposition to 'primitive animal irrationality' often associated with women, disabled and racialised bodies.[72] In the examples above, a heightened awareness of my protagonists' physicality makes them feel insubstantial, rather

[70] Michael S. Carolan, 'The Conspicuous Body: Capitalism, Consumerism, Class and Consumption' *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* (1568-5357), 9. 1. (2005) p. 82.
[71] See Nathalie Olah, *Bad Taste* (Dialogue Books, 2023).
[72] Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey and June Melody, *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class* (New York University Press, 2001) p. 177.

than physically solid, due to a class hierarchy which prioritises detachment over emotion. Beverley Skeggs describes class categories as reproduced by 'a structure of feeling in which doubt, anxiety and fear inform the production of subjectivity.'[73] The women in my novels experience heightened emotions, provoked by the transgression of class boundaries. They understand these emotions as shameful, preventing them from becoming calm, collected, logical subjects, further marking their difference. In *Saltwater,* Lucy says, 'I want to be smooth and seamless. I want to be light and float through the streets' (217). However, the heightened emotions she feels as a result of class inequality further enforce her class position, preventing her from inhabiting the world with the ease she envies in her peers.

My protagonists attempt to detach themselves from these physical feelings of class shame through disembodiment. In both novels, my protagonists must 'return' to their bodies as a means of self-acceptance. At the end of *Saltwater,* Lucy dances in the kitchen. She recognises, 'It is my body welcoming me back. I have missed you, she tells me, sliding her feet across the tiles' (291). Similarly, the protagonist of *Milk Teeth* understands that she must accept the visceral, physical nature of her body in order to move forwards in her life. At the end of the novel, she says, 'I gather my few belongings, smelling the sourness of my unwashed hair and skin and not caring. I am loosening, unlocking, opening my mouth and swallowing the world, in all of its butter and salt' (247). The effects of class and gender manifest as indirect emotions, causing a heightened sense of physicality. This physicality itself is a marker of social marginalisation, and in order to counteract this, my protagonists attempt to distance themselves from their bodies as a means of class aspiration, paradoxically deepening their psychic fragmentation, further inhibiting their assimilation to middle-class society.

[73] Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (Lancaster University Press, 1997). p.13.

Food is a key symbol for this tension between embodiment and disembodiment in my novels. Both protagonists believe the neoliberal, patriarchal myth that individual control over their bodies equates to having control over their lives. They view food as a form of care, nourishment and softness they must reject, as a demonstration of self-control, seeking to better themselves.[74] As Ashbridge notes, in *Saltwater*, Lucy's attempts to transcend her working-class background 'are not centred on the accrual of economic capital, but through the modification of the body as a signifier of self-reliance and cultural capital', [75] demonstrated by the popularity of the 'heroin chic' aesthetic during her teenage years. Lucy says, 'I started eating less, serving myself smaller portions and stopping before I was full. The internet forums I trawled through were filled with hip-bones and clavicles, and I wanted to give myself the best possible chance of becoming someone different' (154).

This symbol of food as a means of rejecting Lucy's working-class inheritance has multiple functions. Julia Kristeva explains that food and nourishment symbolise a mother's care, and that 'a daughter's refusal to eat can be seen as an attempt to escape a mother's control'.[76] When Lucy is at university, she continues to restrict her food intake, as a means of changing her body, which she believes will transform her identity. She addresses her description of a visit to

[74] Historically, eating disorders have been attributed to middle-class women. A study by Muriel Darmon identifies middle and upper-class culture as playing a significant role in the development of eating disorders among adolescent girls. However, contemporary studies consider the intersections of identities which are marginalised by society as risk factors.
See: Muriel Darmon, 'The Fifth Element: Social Class and the Sociology of Anorexia' *Sociology*, 43. 4. (2009) pp. 717-733. doi:10.1177/0038038509105417.
Deborah Mitchison, Phillipa Hay, Shameran Slewa-Younan and Jonathan Mond, 'The Changing Demographic Profile of Eating Disorder Behaviours in the Community', *BMC Public Health* 14. 943 (2014). doi: 10.1186/1471-2458-14-943.
[75] Chloé Ashbridge, 'All I Need is Myself: Spatializing Neoliberal Class Consciousness in the Northern Millennial Novel', in *Locating Classed Subjectivities: Intersections of Space and Working-Class Life in Nineteenth, Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century British Writing,* ed. by Simon Lee (Routledge, 2022). pp 206-222. (p. 213).
[76] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1980) p.3.

Sunderland during her time at university directly to her mother. She says, 'I come home and you hurt at how my collarbones poke out. There are things inside of me that you do not recognise and I do not belong to you any more…I am stifled by people who think they know what shape I should be. I can take you by surprise. Look at my power' (227). She attempts to change her body through caloric restriction, as a means of putting distance between her own body and her mother's, in a simultaneous rejection of her childhood and class origins, as a means of asserting agency. She has seen her mother's vulnerability at the hands of the patriarchal class system and feels that she needs to grow a 'hard' body in order to protect herself. She says, 'I want to be harder and cleaner and better. I don't want to be made from blood and breakable bones like you' (246). Through restricting her food intake, Lucy attempts to protect herself from the abjection, mess and vulnerability which she believes constitute the female, working-class body.

Kristeva writes that to reject food is, 'a revolt against that which gave us our own existence or state of being.'[77] This idea can be applied more widely to Lucy's rejection of Sunderland and her working-class identity. The city itself can be read as her 'mother' and the site of her beginning. Like Lucy's mother herself, the city is fractured in the wake of trauma. While Lucy's mother attempts to piece a new life together in the wake of her divorce, caring for her deaf son, Sunderland itself attempts to find a new identity amidst the fracture of deindustrialisation and the subsequent erosion of working-class pride and community through the dissolution of trade unions. Lucy's rejection of parental figures, including the city of Sunderland, is a means of putting distance between herself and her origins, as a form of social aspiration. Describing London, she says, 'I like this fast and reckless city that does not cradle me…I don't want your softness. I have broken out of my bones' (210). Here, the negative use

[77] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press: 1980) p.2.

of the terms 'cradle' and 'softness' can be read as a refute of parental comfort and care. Her description of breaking out of her 'bones' correlates with the notion of bodily transformation as a means of mobility, which fulfils neoliberal ideology. She believes that if she can change her body, she can change her life. Indeed, if she can escape her body, leaving her 'breakable bones' behind, then she can eschew her background, family and her frustrated sense of self.

The protagonist of *Milk Teeth* uses her eating disorder as a means of concealing her working-class origins, as she attempts to assimilate into the metropolitan, creative class she encounters in London. She has experienced both economic and emotional scarcity alongside regional inequality, and consequently her biggest fear is to have a need or want that she does not have the means to fulfil, revealing her vulnerability and outing her as a member of the working-class. She believes that she must hide the need and desire represented by physical hunger through denying herself food and care, which she believes gives her power. She says, 'I felt invincible, as though I needed less than other people. I didn't need to eat or sleep or spend my nights watching telly. I was flashing neon, my hair fibre-optic, static crackling between my teeth' (70). She wants to become inhuman, synonymous with invulnerable, afraid of revealing her needs, even to herself, because she does not have the resources to meet them. She must forfeit comfort, stability and nourishment in favour of unquantifiable excitement and experience, because she does not have the means to attain both. She says, 'at first, pushing away my hunger made more room inside me to feel everything else. I wanted colour, danger and beauty, things that felt removed from the daily grind of eating, sleeping and my new job at a pub. I shrank my needs for food, safety and comfort in pursuit of poetry and magic. I wanted to live like lightning, which seemed luxurious and out of my grasp' (69). She suppresses her physical hunger by refusing to eat, which allows her to save money on food, allowing her to spend her resources on going out and having 'experiences' instead. The use of modern,

artificial images such as 'neon', 'fibre-optic', 'static' and 'lightning' represent her desire for a robotic, machine-like body, so that she can survive as a working-class woman within capitalist, patriarchal London, a city that she cannot truly afford to live in. Her lack of economic and social security means that safety and adventure are mutually exclusive for her, and she must choose one form of nourishment over the other. She chooses to forgo food in exchange for 'poetry' and 'magic', affective experiences that she cannot fully define or articulate.

Like Lucy, she finds that restricting her food intake leads her to develop a 'hard' body, like an armour, giving her the illusion of extreme self-sufficiency, which she believes she needs to survive, as she cannot rely on other people. Later, when she meets a romantic partner she can depend on, and finds a teaching job which brings her some economic stability, she begins to relinquish this belief and allow space for nourishment and care through food. She observes, 'our lives fold into a shape and I let myself be held by it' (161). Subsequently, she says, 'I run my hands over my stomach and hips, feeling skin, fat and bone beneath my fingertips, part of the world with its trees and tobacco, a person among it, human after all' (227). Previously, the world was a frightening place and she had to seal herself up against it, by refusing to ingest it through food. However, when she begins to feel more secure, she allows herself to be permeated by the physical world, understanding that her sense of inadequacy is caused by class and gender inequality. During a dinner party at a luxurious apartment in Paris, a guest asks why she isn't eating. She explains, 'In that room, there was no reason why I wouldn't want to take the world inside me, to fill myself up on it, without worry or fear. There was nothing sharp or dangerous, nothing edge-close, no choking, smoky hole for me to throw myself into' (205). Her experience of economic and emotional precarity is closely tied to her relationship with food and her body. Scarcity provokes feelings of danger and fear, which means she must be

hard and self-reliant, in order to protect herself, whereas she associates stability with safety and openness, allowing her to demonstrate hunger and vulnerability.

In *Saltwater,* Lucy is similarly plagued by these ideas, in relation to her class position. She is ashamed of the force of her desire for class mobility and consequently feels guilty when she attains it. She repeatedly questions whether she wants or has 'too much'. As a teenager at school she says, 'I always want more. I do not want to be me for reasons I do not understand. I have read too much or seen too much or had too much of something' (153). Here she is unknowingly invoking neoliberal ideals of social mobility and self-improvement. Later, when she moves to London for university, she experiences guilt and self-loathing, fearing her own snobbery, as though she is stating that the lives of her family are not good enough, by choosing something different. When she moves to her grandfather's house in Ireland, in the wake of her father's disappearance at her university graduation, she says, 'I am so afraid of having too much' (47). This fear is linked to societal attitudes towards working-class consumption as a drain on the country's resources amidst political austerity and scarcity.

Her preoccupation with wanting, so central to this novel, is deliberately described through a bodily lexicon. At university in London, Lucy says, 'I am dizzy with want. There is not enough space in this city to contain my desire...I want to bury the sad sick parts of myself deep dark inside so that no one will know I am swollen with want, like a dead body pulled from a river' (271). She dreams of being like her university peers, who she perceives as wanting and needing less than she does, on account of their comfortable middle-class status. The force of her own desire, or her lack of privilege, marks her as 'sick' and 'swollen', like a corpse pulled from a river. This dead body symbolises Lucy's belief that she needs to 'kill' her past and become someone new, so that she can assimilate into middle-class society. Yet, this bloated corpse

floats to the surface, in full view of everyone, betraying the working-class origins she works so hard to conceal. She tries to escape the body that betrays her and yet it is everywhere, mitigating her experience of the world.

In *Milk Teeth*, the protagonist views her need, hunger and class aspiration through the lens of guilt and shame, represented by the amount of space her body physically occupies in the world. As a child, when she learns that she had a twin sister who died at birth, she says, 'I couldn't shake the feeling that I had been given too much and my sister too little, as if I had swallowed all of the goodness in my mother's womb, so there wasn't anything left for her' (47). The use of the word 'swallow' indicates her preoccupation with greed, consumption and food. She interprets her class aspiration as a blight on her family, as though her wants are excessive, and come at the expense of those she loves. She sees herself as a drain on her mother's resources, regretting the amount of space she took up as a foetus in her womb. She transposes her own fears about needing too much onto her mother's body, believing that her sense of guilt and shame stems from something innate inside of her, instead of recognising it for what it truly is: a product of neoliberal, patriarchal society.

In summary, this embodied, affective understanding of social class locates the body at the centre of my novels. My protagonists experience class shame as emotion and physical sensation, which often manifests as dirt or uncleanliness. To deal with these feelings of discomfort, my protagonists psychologically detach from their bodies, resulting in disembodiment. However, the gendered, neoliberal culture of physical self-improvement which surrounds them, alongside the demonisation of working-class women's bodies in the media and political sphere, means they feel trapped by their bodies, even though the connections between their bodies and psyches have been severed. This push and pull between

embodiment and disembodiment colours their experiences of the world, preventing true social mobility. In the following pages, I will examine my use of form, structure, language and imagery, to construct a 'language of the body' which reflects the 'affective bodily economy' at play in my work, as a means of addressing the failures of neoliberal, patriarchal society in providing adequate support for young, working-class, millennial women. The use of first-person authorship in my work is a mode of giving these women autonomy. The protagonists of my novels tell their own stories, beyond the limits of the narratives that are forced upon them by those in power, finding their own language, on their own terms.

Part Two: Applying an Embodied Understanding of Working-Class Womanhood to the Form and Language of the Novel

In Part Two, I will describe how this embodied, affective understanding of gender and social class locates the body at the centre of my novels, through my use of form, structure and language. I will examine the ways in which Eimear McBride uses embodied language in her novels, *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* and *The Lesser Bohemians* to articulate the trauma and gender oppression experienced by her protagonists, as they navigate patriarchal Irish Catholic society in the 1990s. I will demonstrate the ways in which my own work builds on McBride's use of embodiment through my use of innovative form, structure and language, to depict the working-class, millennial, female body, amidst socio-political legacies of neoliberalism and deindustrialisation in the late 1990s and early 2000s, articulating a novelistic language of the working-class, female body, to represent an 'affective bodily economy'.

Eimear McBride's first two novels, *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* and *The Lesser Bohemians* utilise a distinctive form of linguistic experimentation, building on a modernist Joycean legacy,

to represent what McBride herself terms, 'a stream of pre-consciousness', or an attempt to capture thought before it is formalised in conventional language.[78] David Collard describes her work as, 'a new form of prose which employs a deceptively simple lexicon in fragmentary vernacular syncopations to represent thought at the point before it becomes articulate speech.'[79] Both novels follow the trajectories of young Irish women living in the aftermath of sexual assault. The violence they experience at the hands of their perpetrators fractures their relationships with their bodies, reflected in the use of fragmented language, which attempts to capture emotion and impulse at the level of the body, before it is given a grammatical construct through formal language, creating narrative distance. Although my own work is focused on the *indirect* effects of emotional and psychological violence, linked to systemic inequalities, there are links between McBride's construction of a bodily lexicon in her first two novels, and the search for a 'language of the body' in my own work.

The protagonists of McBride's first two novels are distinct characters, yet they share some biographical details; they are both young Irish women who spend time living elsewhere, attempting to navigate their own desires in the wake of trauma and sexual assault. Similarly, the narrators of *Saltwater* and *Milk Teeth* are distinct, yet they are both young women from working-class backgrounds in the north-east of England, attempting to make lives in other places, while navigating the limits placed on their bodies and desires through constructions of gender and social class. In this way, both sets of novels work together to depict bodily representations of patriarchal violence amidst complex socio-political factors.

[78] David Collard, 'Interview with Eimear McBride' *The White Review,* May 2014 <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-eimear-mcbride/> [20.04.25].
[79] David Collard, *About a Girl: A Reader's Guide to Eimear McBride's A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (CB Editions, 2016) p.i.

McBride's work is primarily focused on the psychological effects of physical violence *directly* experienced by her characters, yet it is important to note that the protagonists of *Girl* and *The Lesser Bohemians* both grow up in the Republic of Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s, within a Catholic culture with a long history of the oppression of women's bodies, from associations of menstruation with uncleanliness, to a lack of abortion rights and a lexicon of bodily shame and punishment. As Gerry Smyth observes, 'to write about the Irish female body – to write in particular about Irish female sexual desire – is to engage a field of experience defined and directed by an array of powerful political, religious, social and cultural discourses'.[80] McBride's fixation on physical violence, sexual shame and an attempt to find bodily autonomy within her first two novels can be read as a representation of young Irish women attempting to escape patriarchal religious society. In *The Lesser Bohemians,* during an early sexual experience, Eily, the narrator, declares, 'Ah now Ireland, too much shame' (29), making a clear link between the sexual and bodily shame she feels during this moment, and the shame produced by the Catholic, patriarchal Ireland she has grown up in.

In a description of *Girl,* McBride says, 'I wanted [the reader] to feel they *were* her, and that what was happening to her, and inside her, was also happening within themselves.'[81] My own work is similarly concerned with the ways in which oppression is enacted on the body, and finding a way to embody this within the form and language of the contemporary novel. My own work builds on McBride's linguistic innovation by considering the indirect effects of class inequality and social mobility. My novels demonstrate the ways in which class and gender oppression impact the body, using innovative form, structure and language. This novelistic

[80] Gerry Smyth, 'Displacing the Nation: Performance, Style and Sex in Eimear McBride's The Lesser Bohemians', *Studi Irlandesi*, 9. 9. p.173. doi: <https://doi.org/10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-25510> [29.04.25].
[81] Eimear McBride, 'How I Wrote A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing' The Guardian, (2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/10/guardian-book-club-eimear-mcbride-how-i-wrote-a-girl-is-a-half-formed-thing> [20.04.25].

language is a means of describing this phenomenon as my characters experience it, so that my readers might experience my novels, and therefore class and gender inequality, physically, in their own skin.

i) Fragmentation

Fragmentation is one of McBride's primary methods in representing fractured psychological and bodily experiences, at the hands of patriarchal, religious and state violence. The fragmentation of language, narrative structure and voice has a distinctly feminist lineage. Hélène Cixous writes about the importance of finding a new language for women's writing which signifies, 'a return to the body which has been confiscated from her.' She writes, 'a woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor – once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction – will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language'.[82] Through today's intersectional feminist lens, this seminal text can be criticised for its gender essentialism, yet Cixous' articulation of the necessity of new forms through which to tell marginalised stories is still relevant. The use of fragmentation within contemporary literature is a reinvention of language and structure which has the capacity to reflect the fissured psyches and bodies of characters, as survivors of interpersonal and systemic violence, while also acknowledging the multiplicity and complexity of identities and life experiences which fall under gender and other identity markers.[83] McBride's use of fragmented narrative structure and

[82] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' Trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs,* 1. 4 (Summer 1976) pp.875-893. (p.885). Contemporary theorists whose work builds on Cixous' lineage include Sara Ahmed, Christina Sharpe and Lauren Berlant, among others. Other contemporary writers working in this tradition include Maggie Nelson, Anne Carson and Bhanu Kapil, among others.
[83] See Isabel Waidner, *Liberating the Canon: An Anthology of Innovative Literature* (Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2018).

language draws on these ideas, and the use of fragmentation in my own novels forms part of this lineage.

While McBride's first two novels primarily utilise linguistic fragmentation as their method of experimentation, she also uses unconventional narrative structure to challenge notions of linearity, resisting the notion of conclusion or finality in representing her characters' traumas, both personal and political. *Girl* is structured through five unequal parts, subdivided into numbered sections. The final section of the novel, in which the protagonist begins to break down, leading to her suicide, runs for more than fifty uninterrupted pages. As Collard notes, 'this reflects and embodies the acceleration of the brother's illness and the increasing harshness of the girl's situation. The temporal continuity is at odds with the fragmentation of language and the violence to which the girl is subjected.'[84] Here, the linear structure of the novel is juxtaposed with the girl's fractured psyche, represented through language, conveying the ways in which time continues to move onwards, regardless of her fragmented state. This section accelerates the pace of the novel, demonstrating the girl's lack of control.

The linear structure of *The Lesser Bohemians,* told from the protagonist, Eily's perspective, in present-tense, is interrupted by a monologue from secondary character Stephen, which runs to almost seventy pages (148-215). One of the novel's central concerns is Eily and Stephen's attempts to form a relationship in the wake of their own childhood sexual traumas, wrought from the socio-political context of Ireland, where both characters suffered sexual abuse, amidst repression and shame. Stephen's 'confession' has Catholic connotations of absolution, borrowing a narrative mode derived from a religion steeped in a history of conflict and sexual

[84] David Collard, *About a Girl: A Reader's Guide to Eimear McBride's A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (CB Editions, 2016) p.41.

abuse, particularly in Ireland. Through this monologue, his trauma weighs heavily on the narrative, representing the impact of the characters' suffering at the hands of personal and political harm. This unconventional use of structure causes dislocation for the reader, interrupting the present and disrupting linear time.

Within my own work, the use of fragmentation has further resonance, understood within the context of deindustrialisation and neoliberalism. As previously discussed, in *Saltwater,* Lucy grows up in Sunderland, a city which is struggling to understand its shifting identity in the wake of de-industrialisation. Lucy is too young to remember what it means to be part of a proud industrial region with a sense of purpose, shared values and financial stability, yet the loss of this identity hangs heavy over the city. When she leaves this broken community behind, in pursuit of neoliberal, meritocratic ideals, she experiences a psychic fissure first-hand, reflected in the fragmented structure of the novel. There is simultaneous fragmentation at play here, on a personal level for Lucy, and at a wider regional and national level for the city and community she comes from.

The Lesser Bohemians is set between Ireland and London in the 1990s, during the economic boom. *Girl* was published in 2013, in the wake of the 2007 financial crash. During this period, Ireland underwent seismic changes, from the legalisation of homosexuality in 1993, to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, alongside the economic power of the 'Celtic Tiger', followed by the devastation of austerity, leading to a comparable loss of identity, as Irish society and values shifted and realigned. As Fintan O'Toole declared in 2017, 'At the moment it is not quite clear what the Irish story is. What is the state of us?'.[85] Like Lucy in *Saltwater,* McBride's

[85] Fintan O'Toole, 'The State of Us, Part 1: Ireland's Story Doesn't Make Sense Any More', The Irish Times, (2017) <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/the-state-of-us-part-1-ireland-s-story-doesn-t-make-sense-any-more-1.3186301> [20.04.25].

narrators navigate fragmentation at both micropersonal and macropolitical levels. Smyth notes that her characters, 'barely manage to maintain an outer appearance of (grammatical) control while struggling with the internalised demons of residual trauma.'[86] McBride's use of fragmentation to represent personal sexual trauma, alongside the fractured identities of divided Irish subjects, grappling with the effects of neoliberalism, is comparable to the techniques I use in both *Saltwater* and *Milk Teeth.*

In my own novels, fragmented narrative structure plays an important role. *Saltwater* is composed of more than a hundred short chapters, some as short as a single paragraph in length. These chapters are arranged non-chronologically, moving between my protagonist's childhood in Sunderland, her young adulthood in London, and a present-tense section set in Donegal, Ireland, which anchors the shifting narrative in a specific time and place, from which Lucy is looking back on her life so far. As mentioned, the novel is interspersed with lyrical chapters, where Lucy addresses her mother directly, through the use of the second-person pronoun, 'you', utilising a bodily lexicon to portray the fluctuating intimacy and distance between mother and daughter. For example, 'Redness cracking. Fissures forming…Flesh roiling. Bones shifting…Tissues twisting and saline dripping into something new. Sink into the thick of us. The peach pit slick of us' (15). Here, Lucy speaks to her mother from the moment of conception, articulating the ways in which her mother's body is binding them in ways that can never be broken, introducing this bodily metaphor.

Milk Teeth is also composed of short chapters alternating between the protagonist's life in Barcelona, narrated in present-tense, alongside her childhood in Bishop Auckland and young

[86] Gerry Smyth, 'Displacing the Nation: Performance, Style and Sex in Eimear McBride's The Lesser Bohemians', *Studi Irlandesi*, 9. 9. p.169. doi: <https://doi.org/10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-25510> [29.04.25].

adulthood in London and Paris, told in past-tense. She attempts to understand why she represses her desires in the present moment, through a complex history of gender, social class, Catholicism, family dynamics, sexual violence and objectification. These experiences cause a psychic fracturing, experienced physically, through psychosomatic sensations, resulting in her eating disorder as an attempt to distance herself from these painful feelings. My own work builds on McBride's use of narrative fragmentation to represent gender-based violence and trauma, by depicting class and gender-based shame as physical sensations which disrupt both the form and language of my novels, reflecting my characters' splintered psyches and selfhoods. In my novels, the body becomes a physical symbol of internalised class and gender shame. Systemic oppression affects the body, and the symptom of oppression is shame, which is a feeling of anger and inadequacy turned inwards, policing my protagonists' thoughts and actions, as they become perpetrators of their own suffering.

To return to Bordieu, my fragmented structure is used, amongst other things, to represent Lucy's 'habitus clivé' as a result of her class transgression. As Sam Friedman notes, class mobility can have, 'profound psychic implications…drawing on the psychoanalytic notion of 'splitting the self'…such a dislocation of habitus and field could produce a painfully fragmented self.'[87] In *Saltwater,* when Lucy attempts to build a new life for herself in middle-class London, she observes, 'I had burst out of my own skin but I hadn't grown a new one yet. All the tiny shards of myself were loose and drifting, caught with the dust on the roads, illuminated in car headlights. I watched as they landed in the gutter with a lazy sort of panic. I didn't know how to put myself back together' (221). Again, Lucy conceives of her identity through the symbol of her 'skin'; a corporeal membrane which simultaneously protects and

[87] Sam Friedman, 'The Price of the Ticket, Re-Thinking the Experience of Social Mobility', *Sociology,* 48. 2. (2014) p. 107.

restricts her. She feels her class shame and inadequacy physically, in her body, subsequently reaching for bodily metaphors in an attempt to externalise her emotions. Ahmed writes about the importance of skin as a physical boundary between self and world, stating, 'It is through sensual experiences such as pain that we come to have a sense of our skin as bodily surface, as something that keeps us apart from others, and as something that 'mediates' the relationship between internal or external, or inside and outside'.[88] Lucy experiences psychological pain through her body, which makes her aware of her skin's inadequacy to protect her from the external world. Her boundaries have been shattered and she does not yet know how to build them up again, or what shape and texture they need to be for the new life she finds herself in, where values and identity markers are so different.

This protective and restrictive 'skin' can also be read as a metaphor for her northern, working-class identity. The community in Sunderland, where she grows up, is protective in that it gives her a sense of home, yet she is also restricted by it, due to the lack of opportunities there, linked to class and regional inequality, alongside the legacy of deindustrialisation. As previously mentioned, one of the driving forces of neoliberalism is the focus on the individual to change themselves and their circumstances, often through bodily improvements. Lucy is convinced she can 'burst out' of her old skin and 'grow' a new one, becoming a better version of herself. Yet, her description of 'all the tiny shards of myself' as 'loose and drifting, caught with the dust on the roads and illuminated in car headlights' represents the psychological splintering she feels, as a result of this reinvention. Through this description of her body as something which is physically broken into fragments, lying in the city dirt, Lucy conveys the powerful emotions of Friedman's 'painfully fragmented self' and the sense of worthlessness she feels at university in London.

[88] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014). p.5.

The structure of the novel itself is composed of these 'tiny shards' as Lucy looks back on her childhood and young adulthood, attempting to 'put [her]self back together.' Akin to McBride's disruption of narrative structure through Stephen's monologue in *The Lesser Bohemians,* the final section of *Saltwater* begins with a formal disruption of the text on the page:

> 'then
> later
> something
> different' (287).

This use of blank space represents a shift in Lucy's psyche, as she finds more physical and psychological space for herself within the rural landscape of Burtonport. As Ashbridge writes, 'Burtonport's abundant landscape thus provides the conditions for a kind of psychotherapy, with the increase in material space reflected in sparsely populated pages of text'.[89] Here, the use of fragmentation mirrors a new cohesion in Lucy's mental state, in opposition to the emotional fracturing portrayed elsewhere in the novel.

The fragmented, non-chronological structure of both *Saltwater* and *Milk Teeth* utilises an associative emotional architecture to represent an 'affective bodily economy' as opposed to a traditional linear plot structure. To return to my earlier discussion of Ahmed's work on affect, where she highlights the ways in which our bodies bear legacies of personal and collective

[89] Chloé Ashbridge, 'All I Need is Myself: Spatializing Neoliberal Class Consciousness in the Northern Millennial Novel', in *Locating Classed Subjectivities: Intersections of Space and Working-Class Life in Nineteenth, Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century British Writing,* ed. by Simon Lee (Routledge, 2022). pp 206-222. (p. 220).

histories, as well as accumulating new iterations of these in the present,[90] this associative structure is arguably driven by the body, through the use of emotion. This technique allows the reader to move fluidly between past and present, in order to understand the weight of personal and collective histories on the narrator's present moment. As Lucy says in S*altwater,* 'I knew [my mother] wanted me to let go of things that did not belong to me, but I could not work out which things were mine. I did not know how much of my story I was entitled to take, and how much of the past I was allowed to leave behind' (12). This non-linear narrative structure resists the idea of neat conclusion, suggesting that the identities of these characters will always be in flux, as a result of their class dislocation and psychic fragmentation, disproving neoliberal ideals of meritocracy. As Diane Reay says, 'Bourdieu's concept of habitus enables us to understand women as a complex amalgam of their past and present but an amalgam that is always in the process of completion. There is no finality or finished identity…it is a rich interlacing of past and present, interiorised and permeating both body and psyche.'[91]

This idea is exemplified in *Milk Teeth*, when the narrator says, 'we are almost young, and although our bodies hold many things, they do not show up on our skin yet. It would be easier somehow, if they did' (11). Here, she imagines her past experiences, which form one half of the novel's structure, and which she finds difficult to communicate to her lover, as stored invisibly in her body. Alongside the non-chronological narrative structure, this idea demonstrates the ways in which class dislocation and gender oppression permeate the body, as well as prioritising an affective, emotive understanding of narrative. My protagonist believes that her body itself holds the story of her past, and she feels it would be easier if this were

[90] See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014). p.5.
[91] Diane Reay, 'Feminist Theory, Habitus and Social Class: Disrupting Notions of Classlessness', *Women's Studies International Forum,* 20, 2. (1997) p.3. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(97)00003-4> [29.04.25].

visible on her skin, so she wouldn't need to explain herself. Again, she reaches for a bodily metaphor to externalise the emotions and experiences detailed in the novel's past-tense timeline – arguably a 'language of the body'.

The associative structure of both novels attempts to peel back layers of my protagonists' experiences to reveal the ways in which their bodies hold the effects of class and gender constructs, which have shaped their selfhoods through past experience, informing everything they say and do in the present. To return to *Milk Teeth*, one example of this begins with a scene in the past, when my teenage protagonist is being fitted for her first bra. She is ashamed of her large breasts, valuing smallness and thinness, qualities she interprets as a mode of beauty and therefore class aspiration, linked to the vilification of larger working-class women's bodies she sees in the tabloid media. She observes, 'thinness seemed gorgeous, cultured and rich; women who were in control of their hunger because it could always be met' (58). In the bra-fitting scene, she overhears the bra-fitter tell her mother, 'All the young girls have big boobs these days…it's the hormones in the meat' (12). This comment reduces the narrator to her flesh, making her feel a loss of control over her own body. She is flooded with her own teenage hormones, which are changing her shape, alongside these artificial hormones, inserted into the bodies of animals. There is an implicit comparison between these animals who are bred for slaughter and given hormones to grow bigger, to have more worth, and teenage girls, who are growing into their adult bodies, winning them a place in a sexual economy, without any choice.

This interaction is directly followed by a scene where the protagonist is eating dinner at a friend's house (12). Her friend's father works at an abattoir, and he sits at the dining table, eating meat in a blood-stained shirt. Conflating the discomfort she feels in her changing body with the artificial hormones in the meat on her dinner plate, she vows to become vegetarian.

She says, 'I crossed my arms over my breasts, imagining chemicals coursing through hooves and fur then splitting on my tongue' (13). Here, she equates the blood and violence committed to the animals in the abattoir with the loss of her own innocence, which she misattributes as physical smallness, as she develops a larger adult woman's body. In keeping with neoliberal ideals, she internalises this bodily shame and discomfort, believing that if she could change her body, then she could attain more freedom. She decides to stop eating meat as a means of exerting control over her flesh.

Immediately after this scene, there is a present-tense chapter, where the adult protagonist is in a pub with her friend, Rosa. In reference to the protagonist's burgeoning relationship with her unnamed lover, Rosa tells her, 'you never let yourself have the things you want'. She then asks the protagonist whether she is hungry. The protagonist observes, 'she tosses the menu across the table and I pretend to read it' (13). Her childhood lesson in denial has now taken hold. As a young woman in her twenties, my protagonist has learned to deny herself both emotional and physical nourishment, as a means of distancing herself from feelings of shame, providing an illusion of control in the precarious world around her.

The decision to place these chapters side by side, non-chronologically, ensures that the violence lurking beneath the past-tense narrative – as the protagonist's friend's father 'sat at the head of the table in his bloodstained shirt…mopping up a pool of blood with a slice of white bread' (12) – colours the reader's interpretation of the present. My protagonist emotionally intuits a violence in her relationship to the meat, through the image of blood. She gives up eating meat to distance herself from this violence, directed at animals, yet the reader infers that her changing body is also viewed as meat, through the sexual objectification forced upon her by patriarchal society, and the lack of agency she has over her changing shape. My young protagonist has not

yet learned that she will be viewed in this way, but the reader is aware she is learning to commit a violence to herself, through denial and self-punishment, as a means of escaping her feelings of worthlessness, and reaching for control, which will shape her adult life. Here, the associative, non-chronological structure allows the reader to use emotional inference to understand the connections between the narrator's past and present, using an 'affective bodily economy' to further the narrative.

In *Saltwater,* this narrative mode allows the reader to see parallels and juxtapositions between the lives of Lucy and her mother and grandmother, exploring the experiences of working-class women across generations, connecting Lucy's individual experience to a wider collective history. In Part Three, Lucy describes her grandmother getting up for work each day, before her shift on a fish stall in Jacky White's Market in Sunderland. She describes her grandmother's 'thick Leichner foundation, thick and greasy like stage makeup' and her 'Estée Lauder lipstick' and hair lacquer, 'ready to withstand the day' (236). This is subsequently followed by a chapter which describes Lucy's job in a pub in contemporary London. She says, 'I turned up to every shift in bright red lipstick…it was a barrier between me and the drunken punters, their eyes grazing my body…it let me seem bold during a time when I felt my skin wearing away' (237). Again, this affective architecture allows the reader to infer the socio-political structures and emotions which connect these women across time. Here, both Lucy and her grandmother are working in the service industry, although Lucy is working in London, alongside her university education, which shows how their circumstances have changed across generations. Both women use makeup as armour or performance, highlighting the importance of beauty rituals for working-class women. Earlier in the novel, Lucy says, 'I come from a line of immaculately turned-out women, experts in dusting makeup over their faces to conceal the tremors that ran through their lives' (84), demonstrating the ways in which these women take pride in their

appearances as a means of appearing to be in control of their own lives, passing down working-class pride and femininity across generations, as a coping mechanism and shared experience. The use of an associative narrative structure mirrors the process of memory, placing bodily emotion and experience at the centre of the novel, guiding the reader through a network of associated themes and symbols, as opposed to chronological events, asking them to inhabit my characters' bodies, as well as their minds.

My use of an associative emotional architecture to reflect memory, drawing parallels and juxtapositions across time, is in dialogue with McBride's use of fragmented, imagistic language. She disrupts chronological time to convey the associative nature of memory and trauma, and its impact on the present moment. In *Girl,* McBride addresses the ways in which past traumas and experiences infiltrate her protagonist's present state through her use of language, interrupting linear narratives of progress. She blends free indirect discourse with the protagonist's interior monologue, detailing the protagonist's inner thoughts and feelings, while also including lines of dialogue spoken by other characters alongside prayers, instructions and images from the external world, creating the sense of invasion. As Marshall Lewis Johnson summarises, 'the protagonist-narrator is consistently bombarded by the discourse of the culture that surrounds and overtakes her.'[92]

McBride's use of present-tense, interspersed with images, memories, prayers, brand names and dialogue from other characters also conveys the ways in which the narrator's body and shattered psyche bear traces of personal and socio-political traumas. The protagonist's fissured selfhood means the boundaries between her interior and exterior worlds are fluid and porous,

[92] Marshall Lewis Johnson, 'The Invaded Narrator in Eimear McBride's A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing' *Irish Studies Review*, 28.4. (2020) p. 430. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2020.1831196> [29.04.25].

creating the illusion that time is collapsing inside of her, and everything is happening at once. For example, after she has been sexually assaulted by her uncle, she joins him in prayer with her family. She says,

> 'Prayer time. She called and I went down and we're all sitting there…I see him. Smile at me. A reading from the gospel of St Luke. My own face. I flower a tinct of what I've read alone upstairs. It course me. Whipping blood. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice' (52).

In these lines, the reader is given information about the narrator's memory of reading the gospel in private, alongside the 'private' acts she and her uncle have committed. She associates the gospel story with her own secret shame, linking the words, 'thou shalt deny me thrice' to her own denial of what has taken place with her uncle, as well as his denial of the events to others, shrouded in secrecy. The phrase, 'whipping blood' simultaneously connotes biblical violence alongside physical sensations of shame, desire and confusion, experienced by the protagonist. In this way, the face of her uncle, the voice of her mother, the gospel and her own memories and physical sensations become blurred, reflecting the overwhelming nature of the present, as a result of trauma. In my own work, the relationship between past and present is more distinct, however there is a kinship between McBride's use of inference to blur emotion, memory, impulse, thought, images and sensations, which creates a language of the mind and body in pain. My own use of an associative emotional logic also blurs the distinction between past and present, representing the dislocated mind and body, fallen out of time.

In *Saltwater*, I use a fragmented bodily lexicon to represent the push and pull between Lucy, her mother and the people, place and culture she comes from. The aforementioned short, fragmented sections told in poetic prose, addressed from Lucy to her mother, are highly sensory and imagistic. I use physical language to describe the intimacy and distance between mother and daughter as it changes over time, mirroring Lucy's relationship to her geographic and class origins. The novel opens with a prologue, addressed from baby to mother. The first lines are, 'It begins with our bodies. Skin on skin. My body burst from yours. Safe together in the violet dark and yet already there are already spaces beginning to open between us.' (I) Here, the boundary of skin symbolises the physical and emotional closeness between mother and baby. Lucy's skin forms a protective shell between herself and the world, and in this moment, her mother is incredibly close to what lies beneath it. Later, Lucy's relationship to her mother's body, as well as her own, grows more complex. She sees elements of her mother's body in her own, and seeks to separate herself from both bodies, synonymous with need, vulnerability and care. The line, 'There are already spaces beginning to open between us' evokes the inevitable separation between mother and baby, foreshadowing Lucy's search for autonomy, while also craving intimacy and closeness with her mother. During Lucy's young adulthood in Ireland, where she feels estranged from her mother in the wake of her grandfather's death and her father's disappearance in London, she says, 'something between my mother and me was fractured…it hurt inside of my body, my intestines stretched and sore' (11). Here, the novel uses a direct reference to physical pain as a metaphor for the breakdown of Lucy and her mother's relationship. This bodily lexicon links to the physical and emotional closeness described in the prologue, highlighting the ways in which patriarchy, class inequality and conflicting beliefs have pulled mother and daughter apart.

In the final pages of the novel, Lucy begins to reconcile her relationship with her mother, as well as her working-class origins, and begins to see how her past and present might coexist more easily. This shift is reflected in the corporeal language used to describe their bond. She says, 'I was afraid of the depths of your body for a while but now I want to taste the salt in your blood on my tongue and remember those deep pink bonds that only we know about. The sinews that bind us will stretch and shrink but they are too strong to ever be broken. I want to fill the spaces between us. I want to return to that deep and dangerous place' (293). The 'deep pink bonds' and Lucy's desire to 'fill the spaces between us' directly links to the lines, 'spaces beginning to open between us' and 'we are safe in the pink together' (I) seen in the prologue. Lucy's physical and psychological journey, from baby to adult, is represented through this bodily relationship with her mother. The non-chronological, fragmented structure echoes the stretching and shrinking of the sinews or bond between Lucy and her mother, as it shifts and changes over time, without reaching a place of stasis or definitive conclusion.

The language in *Saltwater'*s lyrical, mother-daughter sections is deliberately fragmented, to represent the intimacy of the relationship as emotional, intuitive and innate, pre-dating linguistic communication. Here, there is a direct link to McBride's notion of a 'stream-of-pre-consciousness', a paradoxical attempt to capture thought before it becomes language. McBride claims she wanted to narrativize the protagonist of *Girl*'s embodied experiences 'on the moment just before language becomes formatted thought'.[93] One reading of McBride's work is her use of a fragmented interior language to depict sexual life and sexual trauma as a means of conveying bodily truth. As Collard notes, 'In creating a language that expresses thought prior to the point of its articulation in speech, she renders the girl's experience with a directness

[93] Shadia Abdel-Rahman Téllez, 'The Embodied Subjectivity of a Half-Formed Narrator: Sexual Abuse, Language (Un)formation and Melancholic Girlhood in Eimear McBride's A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing', *Estudios Irlandeses,* 13. 13. (2018) pp.1-13. (p.3.).

that we share without any of the distance an authorial presence or voice introduces. What happens to the girl happens to the reader, with extreme vividness and intensity. We share her pain and it becomes our pain.'[94] For example, *Girl* opens with a description of the protagonist's own birth:

> 'And her guts said Thank God. For her gasp of air…Mucus stogging up my nose. Scream to rupture day. Fatty snorting like a creature. A vinegar world I smelled…Hand on my head. Her hand on my back. Dividing from the sweet of mother flesh that could not take me in again' (5).

Visceral sensory details, such as 'guts', 'gasp', 'scream', 'rupture', 'snorting', 'vinegar' and 'flesh' locate the reader directly within the girl's highly sensory experience. The short, fragmented sentences and subversion of syntax, such as, 'scream to rupture day' create the impression of a series of bright, flashing images and bodily sensations. These techniques are partly used to convey the perspective of a newborn baby, overwhelmed by the multitude of sensory information in the world beyond the womb. However, the reader learns this sensory lexicon is the language of the novel itself, as the nameless protagonist is reduced again and again to a body, instead of a whole person, to be hurt and abused for other people's gain. Although McBride's language complexifies as her protagonist grows older, the immediate, visceral, bodily sensation remains at the centre of the girl's experience, demonstrating the ways in which her body as an object always speaks before her, and her pain shatters language.[95] The violence forced upon her dissolves her boundaries, fragmenting her identity. Towards the end of the novel, when the girl's sense of self is eroded completely by emotional and physical

[94] David Collard, *About a Girl: A Reader's Guide to Eimear McBride's A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (CB Editions, 2016) p.42.
[95] See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985).

violence, resulting in her suicide, she says, 'I'm only here in my bones and flesh' (198), describing the separation of her mind and body through pain.

As mentioned, *Saltwater* also opens with a scene soon after Lucy's birth, when her mother holds her new baby close. Similarly, this section sets up my 'language of the body' which dictates the novel. My own use of language follows grammatical conventions, however the short, fragmented sentences create a bodily lexicon through adjectives and verbs such as 'wet', 'glistening', 'gasping', 'gulping', 'puffy', 'purpling' 'shifting', 'seeping' and 'viscous'. As with McBride, this opening passage sets up the language of the novel. The opening line, 'it begins with our bodies' signals that this fragmented, sensory language will be used to describe the physical and emotional mother-daughter relationship. This bodily lexicon represents Lucy's physical intimacy and distance with her mother, as well as her fluctuating relationship to Sunderland, her working-class identity and her sense of self. Comparable to McBride, this prologue sets up the language of the novel. This sticky, visceral 'language of the body' holds key themes of embodiment and disembodiment, linked to Lucy's relationship to the people and places she comes from.

Towards the end of *Saltwater*, Lucy addresses her mother, 'Now I know those raw parts of you and feel how sore they blister' (281). She has been pulled closer to her mother by experiencing her father's disappearance. This anxiety is an adult pain, experienced first by her mother, and now belonging to Lucy. At the beginning of the novel, she craves emotional intimacy with her mother, evoked through this bodily lexicon. Towards the end of the narrative, she has 'earned' this intimacy by experiencing her mother's pain. She develops emotional maturity through the realisation, 'there are people in my life who are too big for me to carry but I am beginning to suspect I don't have to. I must learn how to knit my tissues back together' (288). Lucy rejects

the generational burden of her mother's pain, by realising she has some choice in how much she allows the suffering her father has caused to dominate her life. Again, she describes this autonomy through bodily imagery, understanding that she has the strength and power 'to knit my tissues back together'. Lucy begins to see that she can only reconcile her past by reconnecting to her own body, which is the site of her emotional pain, caused by the impacts of the patriarchal class system on her family and sense of responsibility.

ii) Embodied language

As discussed, McBride's use of embodied language encourages her reader to inhabit her protagonists' flesh by attempting to 'get under the skin of thought'[96] and capture emotive, embodied experience before the distancing created by formalised language. In *Girl,* the language grows increasingly fragmented as a result of the protagonist's trauma, caused by violence and grief. The physical and psychological pain she feels 'shatters language and communication'.[97] As Téllez notes, 'McBride creates a new language for her character to express the disintegration of speech, which in turn parallels the fragmentation of embodiment'.[98] For example, when the protagonist is sexually abused by a stranger after her brother's wake, her language is marked by the use of upper and lowercase letters, repetition, misspellings, ellipses and words running into each other, reflecting her heightened physical and emotional state:

[96] Susan Cahill, 'A Girl if a Half-formed Thing? Girlhood, Trauma, and Resistance in Post-Tiger Irish Literature', *Literature, Interpretation, Theory,* 28. 2. (2017) pp. 153-171. doi:10.1080/10436928.2017.1315550.
[97] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985). p.5.
[98] Shadia Abdel-Rahman Téllez, 'The Embodied Subjectivity of a Half-Formed Narrator: Sexual Abuse, Language (Un)formation and Melancholic Girlhood in Eimear McBride's A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing', *Estudios Irlandeses,*13.13. (2018) pp.1-13. (p.7.).

> 'Hurts m. Jesus skreamtheway he. Doos the fuck the fuckink slatch in me. Scream. Kracks. Done fuk me open he dine done on me. Done done Til he hye happy fucky shoves upo comes ui. Kom shitting ut h mith fking kmg I'm fking cmin up you. Retch I. Retch I. Dinneradntea I choke mny. Up my. Thrtoat I. … mY nose my mOuth I. VOMit. Clear. CleaR. He stopS up gETs' (149).

The violence inflicted upon the protagonist locates her both inside and outside of her own body. She attempts to simultaneously take ownership of her body and distance herself from the pain caused by her abusive uncle through having sex with strangers. She says, 'I met a man. I met a man. I let him throw me round the bed…I met a man and many more and I didn't know you at all' (97). The repetition of 'I met a man' demonstrates the anonymity and facelessness of the men she has sex with, trying to place as many bodies as possible between herself and her uncle. She describes a sexual experience in the unnamed city she moves away to as, 'Spin the brain away from here' (87), exemplifying the duality of sex in her life, and the way she uses it to attain simultaneous embodiment and disembodiment. She wants to be 'all body' without her brain, and she also wants to be 'all brain', without her body. Téllez writes, 'there is, therefore, an incompatibility between the pain felt in the body and consciousness, indicating the protagonist's dualistic approach towards her embodied identity.' In *Girl,* McBride's use of fragmented language therefore represents the simultaneous connection and disconnection inherent within her protagonist's embodied experience. The protagonist is reduced to her body, through the pain of sexual violence. The overwhelming experience of pain renders a person 'all body' through heightened physical sensation. The girl in pain seeks to escape her body by any means, provoking disconnection and the shattering of a whole, cohesive identity, represented through fragmentation. To return to Téllez, 'on the one side, it can be a dissociative mechanism to punish the body, but, at the same time, it triggers the re-embodiment of the

subject, for the Girl realises that she cannot separate mind from body…this is the ultimate fragmentation of her half-formed identity.'[99]

In both *Girl* and *The Lesser Bohemians,* the violence of female penetration within sexual assault represents the ways in which the protagonists of both novels have been forced to bear emotions and sensations beyond their choosing, provoked by systemic oppression. These narrators carry the shame of inhabiting women's bodies amidst a history of Catholic control within Ireland. Their bodies hold the violence enacted upon them by the men who assault them, and the linguistic fragmentation represents the ways in which this shatters their consciousness and sense of self. Cahill notes, 'the novel as a whole—and in particular its linguistic experimentation—gives space to the preconsciousness of the girl but also draws our attention to the inhospitality of our culture to the articulation of the young girl and the ways in which her sexuality, desire, and emotion are distorted in our current modes of representation'.[100] In other words, *Girl* represents the inherent fragmentation of inhabiting a young woman's body in Ireland at this particular moment in time. The protagonist is pure body; sensation and emotion without the distance of language. And yet simultaneously, she is divorced from her own body through sexual abuse and objectification, using her own sexual power as a means to move ever closer to and yet distant from her own flesh.

There is a clear connection between McBride's characters and the protagonists of my own novels, who seek escape from their psychological pain, caused by class dislocation, then internalised and misdirected at their bodies. They try to escape their own bodies through sex, drinking and denial, paradoxically triggering re-embodiment. While McBride's work explores

[99] Shadia Abdel-Rahman Téllez, 'The Embodied Subjectivity of a Half-Formed Narrator: Sexual Abuse, Language (Un)formation and Melancholic Girlhood in Eimear McBride's A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing', *Estudios Irlandeses,*13.13. (2018) pp.1-13. (pp.7-8. and p.11).
[100] Susan Cahill, 'A Girl if a Half-formed Thing? Girlhood, Trauma, and Resistance in Post-Tiger Irish Literature', *Literature, Interpretation, Theory,* 28. 2. (2017) pp. 160-161. doi:10.1080/10436928.2017.1315550.

the effects of *direct* physical violence, influenced by socio-cultural and socio-political violence and repression, my own novels seek to represent the ways in which the violence of class inequality becomes written on the body, *indirectly* disrupting my protagonists' connection to themselves and the world.

In *Girl,* McBride's use of fragmented, embodied language addresses the impossibility of her protagonist's escape. She is wounded and traumatised by patriarchal society, and cannot find the words to articulate her pain, trapping it inside of her. If conventional language is a product of this oppressive society, McBride attempts to provide her with an alternative. However, language fails her; nameless and broken, she ends her own life.

While McBride articulates the traumatised, objectified and oppressed young woman within Ireland during the late 1980s and early 1990s, my own novels represent the enactment of class and gender shame on millennial, working-class women's bodies in the late 1990s and early 2000s, within neoliberal Britain. As we have seen, the protagonists of my novels experience feelings of shame and self-loathing, as products of patriarchal, capitalist society, combined with neoliberal ideals, which require individuals to change themselves, instead of addressing societal inequality and improving conditions for working-class people. This individual shame and self-loathing becomes somatised, often experienced as physical sensations of bodily discomfort or uncleanliness. In my novels, the body is symbolic, representing my characters' shame and inadequacies, their relationships with their mothers, and their connections to and disconnection from the places and working-class communities they come from. They experience emotional distress at this severance from their origins, as a result of class mobility. Due to their status as working-class women, and society's vilification of working-class women's bodies, alongside neoliberal ideals of self-improvement, these women project their discomfort onto themselves, blaming their own bodies for their shortcomings, instead of

recognising the ways in which hierarchical, patriarchal society has failed them. In novelistic terms, my protagonists' bodies are symbols which hold these complex themes together.

One of the key differences between McBride's work and my own is that language offers my protagonists an escape. They are both searching for the words that will allow them to articulate who they are and what they want, which is a means of setting them free. My unconventional use of language and form in both novels provides my narrators with words they can shape on their own terms, beyond the bounds of patriarchal, neoliberal society. This gives them the ability to name and define themselves, which is a source of power.

Another way in which my writing builds on the work of McBride is by demonstrating the ways in which class disparity intersects with gender inequality to cause psychological pain. This suffering is misdirected at the body, causing complex feelings of disembodiment for my protagonists as they attempt to escape their pain, conveyed through innovative literary methods. In *Milk Teeth*, the protagonist and her mother feel a sense of inadequacy at the narrator's school leavers party, as one of the only single-parent families in attendance. The narrator projects these feelings of failure and sadness onto her body, feeling uncomfortable in her prom dress. She views her body as large and ungainly, representative of the magnified sensations of the emotions she is feeling. She says, 'the badness I felt clung to my body, dripping from the hem of my dress, exposing my thighs…I was not bright or pretty enough…neither of us was good enough for my father and a sadness clung to us, giving our skin a sickly sheen' (86). Again, my protagonist reads her emotions in her own skin, blaming herself for the ways in which her working-class, single-parent family is looked down upon. Fluent in the language of self-punishment, she blames her body for this social failure, telling the reader, 'I lived on toast and water for a whole week afterwards, punishing my body for letting me and my mother down' (86). Eating disorders affect women across the class spectrum

for myriad reasons. As discussed, female beauty is often equated with thinness, and here, like many women, my protagonist associates her feelings of physical 'largeness' with 'wrongness'. During this time period, reality television and celebrity culture offered working-class women the promise of wealth and fame, if they were conventionally beautiful enough. My protagonist absorbs this false promise, viewing thinness as a form of beauty. She believes that if she shrinks her body, she might be able to transcend her circumstances. She does not have control over her gender or class position, yet she thinks she has the power to change the shape of her own body, through caloric restriction. My narrator feels societal shame and emotional pain during her school prom, for the perceived inadequacies within her family. Instead of articulating this shame, she projects it onto her own body, blaming her shape and size. She punishes herself for her supposed transgression, without understanding the patriarchal class system has made her feel this way.

In *Saltwater*, Lucy also blames her body for her perceived shortcomings. In London, she is invited to a party hosted by a prince in a South Kensington mansion. She has not eaten all day, as a means of emotional repression, and she gets very drunk at the party, to hide the fact she feels out of place. She steals canapes and expensive cigars to show her friends later, then trips and falls down the stairs, and is asked to leave. She observes, 'I saw the marble staircase behind her, grand and white and streaked with my blood' (239). Her blood is synonymous with dirt, flesh and female shame. Her leaking, female, working-class body physically intrudes on the clean, luxurious aristocratic house, marking her transgression of boundaries. She cannot escape the 'sad pink shape' of herself, which represents everything she believes she must leave behind, to become someone better (273).

The highly symbolic nature of my protagonists' bodies, and their desperation to distance themselves from their physicality, and therefore their pain, through restricting physical and emotional nourishment, results in disembodiment. McBride's multi-layered use of disembodiment and re-embodiment in her early novels is linked to the cycle of bodily shame and self-loathing in my own work. In *Milk Teeth*, my protagonist learns to replace difficult emotions with hunger, through restricting food. She says, 'my hunger held my worry and fear like a dam, so I didn't have to feel it any more' (15). The use of hunger to avoid difficult emotions involves simultaneous embodiment and disembodiment. In one sense, the feeling of hunger allows a person to detach from physical pain by rendering them 'all body', due to the all-consuming physical sensation. Yet, the denial of hunger also results in disconnection from the body through the repression of physical demands. Later, when my protagonist attempts to reunite with her bodily needs, she realises, 'I spent so long pretending I was not there, I forgot that I was made of muscle, tooth and bone, something solid that could be broken' (104). Here, she recognises that, in her past, she attempted to distance herself from her body as a means of avoiding vulnerability, because it didn't feel safe for her to express physical and emotional needs. Neoliberalism teaches her that she must be independent and self-sufficient if she wants to create a better life for herself, represented in her sense of isolation and denial of bodily needs.

In *Saltwater*, Lucy observes, 'I am wrong again and I will never be right…the other girls seem smoother, thin wrists cool and marbled, whereas I am sticky and hungry and soiled' (246). Here, she associates the body with dirt, vulnerability and need. She believes she needs a hard, boundaried exterior so that she can survive in the world. The protagonists of both novels become alienated from themselves and the changing world around them, by attempting to shut themselves off from their physicality. However, at the end of both novels, reconnection with their bodies symbolises my protagonists' character development and growth. In *Saltwater*,

Lucy dances in the kitchen. 'It is my body welcoming me back,' she says. 'I have missed you, she tells me, sliding her feet across the tiles' (291). Lucy's use of the third-person pronoun 'she' denotes that she still sees herself as separate from her body, yet the distance between her mind and body is closing, as she accepts her northern, working-class identity as an essential part of who she is, pushing back against neoliberal, meritocratic ideals of self-improvement. At the end of *Milk Teeth*, the protagonist says, 'I gather my few belongings, smelling the sourness of my unwashed hair and skin and not caring. I am loosening, unlocking, opening my mouth and swallowing the world, in all of its butter and salt' (247). Her connection to the flavours and textures of the world is synonymous with forging a new connection to her body. These feelings of embodiment, recognising her own flesh and its connection to the world, in contrast with her earlier experiences of disembodiment, are key to loosening the constraints that patriarchal, hierarchical, neoliberal society have placed on her.

My narrators are caught in a bind; they feel trapped by their bodies and everything their flesh symbolises, consequently seeking to escape them. They try to gain distance from their own bodies through caloric restriction, emotional suppression and self-punishment. Conversely, this repression of their physical desires magnifies their importance, triggering re-embodiment, trapping them in their own skin, unable to see a way out. This conflict is represented in the highly sensory, corporeal language of both novels, centring my protagonists' bodies, and therefore their pain, at the heart of my work. Like McBride's narrators, they are forced to hold pain inside of their bodies that they did not choose to keep there. The narrator of *Milk Teeth* describes the sadness she feels as, 'something the world outside me had pushed into my body and forced me to carry' (193). While McBride's characters bear the pain of patriarchal religious oppression and gender-based violence, my own characters shoulder the weight of class and

gender shame, shaped by post-industrial, neoliberal ideals, enacted upon working-class women's bodies.

McBride's work is primarily concerned with the inadequacy of conventional language to represent her characters' pain. However, she also explores articulation of desire as a means of refuting patriarchal control. In *The Lesser Bohemians,* Eily, the protagonist, articulates her sexual desire, refuting Catholic, patriarchal discourses which suppress women's bodies and desires. This articulation gives her agency, exemplified in a sex scene with Stephen, where the reader witnesses her shame transformed into power through the act of sex itself.

> 'Can I go down on you? No! Little baby Jesus won't mind. Oh my God no! That's a shame, how about? haAh. Oh you like that then? Likes it himself when I Yes. And get close now so close with him. All the clicks and licks and by the time he says Do you want to fuck me? Yeah, I say I do' (49).

In this physical description of sex, the reader witnesses Eily switch from a position of shameful submission, linked to Catholic suppression of sexuality, to autonomy and dominance, through the articulation of her desire. My own work takes this bodily autonomy further by articulating class and gender shame through visceral, sensory language which positively foregrounds the body, as a means of resisting shame and silence provoked by classed, patriarchal, neoliberal society.

In *Saltwater*, Lucy describes her father's unnamed alcoholism and depression during her childhood as something she has stored within her own flesh. As an adult, she finds freedom in naming his illnesses which have impacted her life. She says, 'it feels liberating to name things;

to push them out of my body like long, sharp splinters' (45). Conversely, the protagonist of *Milk Teeth* is trapped within her own suffering, partly due to her inability to name it. She longs for language to articulate her feelings, which she believes will bring her relief. She says, 'I needed a name that described what I was, a word that I could hold onto' (173). The reader never learns the protagonist's name, but the novel ends with her naming herself, in the final line, 'He asks me my name and I tell him' (248). Here, she has learned to name and accept who she is, symbolising the way language gives agency to the women in my novels. As Lucy observes in *Saltwater*, 'Naming things gives them shape and form, which means they can be picked up and taken away' (45). While McBride's work depicts the impossibility of language in reflecting her characters' emotional and physical experiences, my own protagonists find freedom in articulating and naming pain, as a means of externalising their shame, allowing them autonomy.

The highly sensory, visceral language in my work reflects the symbolic nature of the body, while also claiming the sticky, abject aspects of physical experience that my protagonists attempt to distance themselves from, as a means of rejecting shame. In *Saltwater*, the fragmented mother-daughter sections mimic flashes of memory, anchored to the body and senses. For example, 'Salt stings my eyes, wet-cold and sun-dappled. I spit silt from my lips…scrape my knees over rocks and soothe nettle spots in the spray'. Here, my use of visceral language reflects the dichotomy of pain and pleasure inherent within bodily experience. Lucy's body is injured by swimming in the sea, depicted through 'stings' and 'scrape', yet it is also capable of soothing. She feels pain and 'grit', while simultaneously experiencing wonder and pleasure through 'the giddy of the waves moving under me' and 'limbs trickling gold' (106). This multi-layered representation of physicality through highly imagistic, lyrical language, captures the reality of inhabiting a working-class woman's body, in both suffering and joy. In

this example of Lucy swimming, the use of sibilance and alliteration gives the language weight and texture in the mouth, creating a pleasurable, full-bodied experience for the reader, creating intimacy with Lucy by mirroring her experience. My sensory writing asserts positive aspects of embodied experience, alongside the constrictive nature of my protagonists' physicality, due to the somatic effects of class and gender oppression.

In *Milk Teeth,* the memories in the past-tense timeline are provoked by instances of bodily shame, desire or repression in the protagonist's present. These memories are often painful and difficult, detailing instances of sexual assault, disordered eating, class shame, family conflict and unhealthy romantic relationships. The stark past-tense sections are juxtaposed with abundant, highly sensory language used to describe her present-day life in Barcelona. For example, a past-tense description of the addiction which afflicts the men in my protagonist's family provides an explanation for her relationship to denial in the present. She says, 'I felt the pull of addiction but different things were expected of me, so I buried myself in denial instead' (159), considering the role of gender expectations in the development of her eating disorder. This scene is followed by a present-tense depiction of the narrator eating different kinds of food in Barcelona, attempting to occupy her body more fully, resisting the denial she learned in her childhood and young adulthood, rejecting her family inheritance. She says,

> 'We eat lemony anchovies in pools of sunflower oil, plates of bravas in spicy salsa. We try burrata with peppery rocket, thin slices of coca bread brushed with garlic, drinking cheap cava and fizzy water, bubbles glittering in our mouths…I gorge myself on the colour of you and this quicksilver city, where want prickles our tongues like sour cherries and we satiate each other, the air thick with heat and smoke, clouds clotted with dirty rain' (161).

The use of flavours and textures such as 'lemony anchovies', 'spicy salsa', 'peppery rocket', 'sour cherries' and 'bubbles glittering' represents the ways in which the world is coming to life for my protagonist, as she attempts to understand the classed, patriarchal society which has taught to her to repress her desires, as a result of bodily shame. The embodied language of the novel itself depicts her push and pull between embodiment and disembodiment, as a result of her class and gender position. The narrator's daily struggle with desire and control, and her longing to simultaneously inhabit and escape her body, means that it is present everywhere. During a period of emotional turmoil, she sees, 'the day seeping into the sky like blood in milk' (222), demonstrating the bodily leaking into the landscape. This image of blood in milk partly represents the contamination of one pure, white substance with another, symbolising her attempt to destroy a positive relationship, and a sense she has contaminated herself, by causing her own suffering. Yet, this contamination is complex; milk is associated with motherhood and nourishment, whereas blood, particularly female blood, has connotations of dirt and uncleanliness. Milk and blood are both substances created by the female body, and while the 'blood in milk' seems ominous to the narrator, she must accept the visceral, abject elements of her body she wishes to distance herself from, so that she might feel whole. At the end of the novel, she recognises, 'guilt clogs my throat but I keep eating anyway, taking life in my mouth and choosing to be part of it, even though I am afraid' (247). The questions of desire, denial, abundance, scarcity, repression, expression, gender, social class and participation in the world she is attempting to answer all intersect with her relationship to her body. As a result, her body is everywhere, including the landscape, and in the language of the novel itself.

Conclusion

In summary, my novels *Saltwater* and *Milk Teeth*, paired with my thesis, form an original contribution to knowledge by articulating an affective, embodied understanding of the intersection of gender and social class.

Through my exploration of young millennial womanhood between 2000-2010, I consider the implications of deindustrialisation and New Labour's education policies and neoliberal ideals, followed by political austerity in the wake of the 2007 financial crash, on working-class people. I discuss the effects of the rise of working-class celebrities and the tabloid media on representations of working-class women's bodies, and the ways in which thinness and beauty were seen as vehicles for social aspiration. I outline the impact of this on the young women in my novels, who are made to feel ashamed of their working-class backgrounds when they attempt social mobility through education, relocation and socialisation with middle-class creatives. My protagonists internalise this shame, absorbing the demonisation of working-class women's bodies by the tabloid media, and the pressure placed on women across social classes to control their physical shape and size. They misdirect these feelings of inadequacy, created by the patriarchal class system, onto their bodies, experiencing them as physical sensation.

To avoid these feelings of shame and discomfort, the protagonists of my novels attempt to escape their bodies through sensory experiences of substances, sex and dancing, alongside repression and denial of emotional and physical needs. They become detached from their bodies, which leads to disembodiment; yet their denial of physical needs ultimately triggers re-embodiment through the magnification of physical desires such as hunger. My protagonists are caught in a bind, unable to escape their bodies, which they blame for their inadequacy and

shame. They become trapped without the language to understand or articulate these feelings, which do not originate in their skin. Rather, these emotions and sensations are products of the patriarchal class system and failures of neoliberal meritocracy, which must be externalised so that my protagonists can find more freedom for themselves and those around them.

The innovative use of form, structure and language in my novels is a means of constructing a 'language of the body' which is authentic to my characters, allowing them to articulate their affective experiences of class and gender inequality, enabling them to live more freely. In *Saltwater,* my use of fragmented structure represents Lucy's shattered psyche, torn apart by individual and collective class dislocation. In both novels, the use of non-chronological narratives allows me to construct an associative emotional architecture, mirroring memory and bodily sensation, drawing parallels and juxtapositions between the lives of working-class women across generations. In *Saltwater*, I use a fragmented bodily lexicon to foreground the physical relationship between mother and daughter, symbolising the push and pull Lucy feels between the people, place, culture and social class she comes from, and the life she tries to build for herself, on her own terms. In *Milk Teeth*, my use of heightened sensory language locates my protagonist's body, and therefore her class and gender-inflicted pain, at the heart of the novel. My use of visceral, embodied language is also a means of celebrating the sticky, abject aspects of physical experience that my protagonists attempt to distance themselves from, rejecting bodily shame. In both novels, the body is a symbol of shame and inadequacy, yet my use of an affective 'language of the body' allows my protagonists to articulate this shame in their own words, giving them distance from it. This distance allows them to recognise the shame and self-loathing coiled in their skin as forced upon them by the patriarchal class system. The recognition of these external forces enables them to locate their shame, pushing it back into the world, allowing them more freedom.

For myself, writing *Saltwater* and *Milk Teeth* has been a process of articulating the class and gender shame I carried in my own body. I developed a language which enabled me to externalise my own inadequacy and tell my story on my own terms, turning my feelings of worthlessness into power. This power allowed me to celebrate the northern, working-class facets of my identity, instead of hiding them, permitting me to fit more comfortably within my own skin. I hope that my articulation of the bodily impact of class and gender-inflicted shame offers my readers a language to externalise their own inadequacies. I want to draw attention to the body as the site of oppression, to demonstrate the physical human cost of inequality. As Scarry says, 'what is quite literally at stake in the body in pain is the making and unmaking of the world'.[101] To return to Waidner's call for a broader definition of 'literature' which is inclusive to writers from non-traditional backgrounds, I hope that together we can find our own innovative languages to articulate disparity, which is a means of refuting shame.[102] In 2025, inequality within the UK and across the world continues to widen. Gender equality, access to education and art and bodily autonomy for every person are increasingly under threat, and language is used by the patriarchal elite to create acute social division.[103] I hope my discussion

[101] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985). p.26.
[102] See Isabel Waidner, *Liberating the Canon: An Anthology of Working-Class Literature* (Dostoyevsky Wannabe, 2018).
[103] See Severin Carrell, 'Legal definition of woman is based on biological sex, UK supreme court rules', The Guardian (2025) <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/apr/16/critics-of-trans-rights-win-uk-supreme-court-case-over-definition-of-woman> [24.04.25].
See Toby Helm, 'All UK families 'to be worse off by 2030' as poor bear the brunt, new data warns', The Guardian (2025) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/mar/22/all-uk-families-to-be-worse-off-by-2030-as-poor-bear-the-brunt-new-data-warns >[24.04.25].
See Sarah Butler, 'UK awarded its lowest ranking in workplace equality in a decade', The Guardian (2025) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/03/uk-awarded-its-lowest-ranking-for-workplace-gender-equality-in-a-decade> [24.04.25].
See Lanke Bakarae, Raphael Boyd, Nadia Khomami and Robyn Vinted, 'Working-class creatives don't stand a chance in UK today, leading artists warn' The Guardian (2025) <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/feb/21/working-class-creatives-dont-stand-a-chance-in-uk-today-leading-artists-warn> [24.04.25].

of the personal cost of disparity is a means of connecting to collective class and gender identities, so that we can work together to refute silence, which is bound in shame. I genuinely believe in the power of language to change lives, as it has transformed mine.

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Redaction statement

This PhD by Prior Publication is comprised of the critical exegesis above, alongside the novels *Saltwater* (Sceptre: 2019) and *Milk Teeth* (Sceptre: 2022) by Jessica Andrews. Due to copyright, these novels have been redacted from the publicly accessible version of this work.