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CONCRETE DIAMONDS: EXEGESIS
IN PURSUIT OF RADICAL PRAXIS

PHD CREATIVE & CRITICAL WRITING
SWANSEA UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

As a contribution to feminist epistemology, *Concrete Diamonds* is an emancipatory undertaking, seeking to unearth discrepancies between social ontology and the historical realism of working-class people's lives. *Concrete Diamonds* is an experimental, hybrid novel encompassing two distinct literary genres which interlink technically, introspectively, and thematically. The dominant (or principal narrative) is a polyphonic homage to working-class people of different ages, genders, races, and sexual orientations, living in the margins of post-industrial neoliberal Britain. The principal narrative is then bookended with phallic concrete poetry. This experimental structure not only allows for a deeper, more nuanced exploration of hidden narratives but seeks to draw experiential links concerning economic poverty, stigmatisation and marginalisation developed during crucial periods of social change in the contemporary history of Britain. Inspired by the principles of *fusion fiction*,¹ my novel has multiple starting points in a variety of narrative voices and literary styles, and it encompasses the poetic to polemic; social realism to magical realism; melodramatic and comedic — all of which not only bolsters character and plot development but also fortifies the novel's non-

¹ Termed by Bernadine Evaristo, as a technique consisting of a "pro-poetic patterning on the page ... to flow freely from interiority to exteriority, from the past to the present, from one character's narrative to the next," (2021, p. 142).

conformist message. While tracing the creative *becoming* of the central character, Girlo Wolf, the story brings to life five generations of familial relationships, with adjoining friendships and acquaintances and is an exploration of the rich and diverse lived experiences, illuminating the past origins and present conditions of discrimination, marginalisation and subjugation.

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Concrete Diamonds: Exegesis

1. In Pursuit of Radical Praxis.

1.1. Introduction

“Literary influences are important, but we are carrying so much more within us that alchemizes into our creativity.”

Bernadine Evaristo (2021 p. 156).

From a metaphorical perspective, this exegesis acts like a body of water, inviting the reader to dive into the author’s thoughts, prior, during and post-creation. Aptly described as a “schizophrenic” (2004, p. 1) undertaking by Jeri Kroll in *The Exegesis and the Gentle Reader* (2004), the Creative & Critical Writing thesis is essentially a hybrid where the author is both captain (critical analyst) and the vessel (novelist), navigating a multitude of voices and numerous directions, but ultimately deciding on the course in which the creative work takes. As T.S. Eliot advocates, the thesis must direct the reader to the past so that we “can construct an original future ... *being new* is intimately and inextricably bound up with cultural knowledge” (*ibid* p. 5) and a “cultivated awareness” (*ibid* p. 6) that contributes to the academic and artistic community. It could be said that it is within the exegesis that theory and practice merge to form a new praxis, which is the creative work, or novel, itself.

From conception to dissemination, creative writing is an experiential, immersive process. Without universal inclusion, fiction can stagnate, distort, and hinder, rather than advance, cultural creativity, thereby diluting its potential for discoveries and subsequent

societal change. As a literary activist and Award-winning novelist, Bernadine Evaristo accurately states, “writing is so much more than a technical exercise” (*ibid* p. 145), suggesting that our experiential and reflexive involvement in research and writing should be recognised as a fundamental principle in the development of radical praxis, especially within oppressed social groups. This is especially important as literature is increasingly democratised via digital platforms, yet white middle-class authors, predominantly male, continue to dominate publishing lists. There is much discussion regarding the ethnocentric nature of literature, with the exclusion of diverse voices depreciating the integrity of cultural creativity. The 2019 Booker prize winner, Evaristo, advocates a universal approach, describing her joint win with Margaret Atwood as a “landmark historical moment for literature and for the sisterhood” (2021, p. 145). She declares in her seminal work, *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*, “these are exciting times” (*ibid*). With this in mind, I have adopted a philosophical framework of investigation using phenomenological hermeneutics and applied critical theory whilst implementing a triangulation framework that endeavours to “guide, lead and interpret” (2004, p. 2). my novel, or radical praxis, *Concrete Diamonds*.

- a. *Sociological Influences* take a theoretical approach to explore women’s life stories since our transition from nomads to farmers to the industrialised, patriarchal structures which have shaped society today and seek to unravel dominant ideological beliefs associated with neoliberal capitalism. Emerging during the political administration of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan, neoliberalism places sole responsibility on the individual, reducing state support and imposing right-wing ideals of individualism, meritocracy, consumerist competition, laissez-faire economics and free-market trade. Such ideas have since permeated social ontology to the extent that it is considered *common sense* to be “competitive, self-interested consumers who act independently from each other” (Cant & Hardes, 2021, p. 54). As working-class women’s life stories

have been systematically misrepresented, silenced, and side-lined under the “multiple forms of discrimination” of what Patricia Collins refers to as the *Matrix of Domination* (cited in Knudsen, 2006, p. 61), this exegesis attempts to contribute to feminist discourse, examining the epistemological standpoints of all characters whose life histories² are underpinned by Marxist feminist theory and intersectionality. From a phenomenological perspective, discoveries relating to broader social phenomena are highlighted, e.g., the abstract phenomenon of housework, commonly considered *women’s work* is of lesser importance to *men’s work* because it is unpaid. However, Marxist feminism sees housework as a mechanism for gender exploitation where working-class women raise children to become underpaid workers and support husbands, who are overworked and underrepresented within the labour market. Such discrepancies between neoliberal capitalism and historical realism have been exposed in the lives of all the female characters in *Concrete Diamonds*. Nannie Pearl is a strong matriarchal figure who, since the 1970s, has achieved a level of autonomy and liberation. She lives in a community that is economically deprived as a result of Thatcher-led post-industrialisation. As Nannie Pearl has worked her way out of poverty (from the stone farmhouse of post-war Britain), she is insistent on preventing the same predicament for her offspring. As her family grows under the restrictive conditions of relative deprivation, where advertisers promote the idea of *betterment* via the purchase of goods, she strives to ensure that they are equipped with the social capital to get ahead. Due to her meagre security benefits, she sets up a profitable business committing an inevitable blue-collar crime within the current climate. However, Pearl is “grassed” by a community member, and the state shuts her down. Jock Young & John Lea coined this *left realism*, arguing that social deprivation leads to “rule-breaking” (cited in Cant

² Feminist social scientists perceive life histories as “action orientated because collectively they can help women understand the similarity of women’s experiences” (Humm, M. *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* 2004 pg. 152-3).

& Hardes, 2021, p. 106), which results from a rise in consumerism, relative poverty, an increase of sub-cultural groups and marginalisation (lack of representation in dominant institutions). Marxists see capitalism as responsible for deprivation, facilitating a hotbed of crime, where criminal action becomes necessary to solve economic poverty. Termed “criminogenic” (*ibid*), capitalism is seen as generating crime, with Neo-Marxists regarding crime as a form of resistance to oppression.

In addition to performing *women’s work*, Pearl is also an unpaid *Women’s Aid* activist, an organisation that, underfunded, receives little political attention in a disproportionately male-dominated government. She also represents her community in local government, fighting for economic justice, but, like most women in her position, Pearl must find additional income to ensure that she and her offspring survive.

b. *Subject Matter* encompasses the practice of living, which cannot be understood in isolation because “totality refers to the view that social phenomena are interrelated and form a total whole.”³ In this sense, *Girlo Wolf*, a fictionalised version of myself, is the lynchpin upon which the various phenomena rests. Drawing on an accumulation of historical data,⁴ my novel includes memories from personal experience, situational knowledge, inherited stories, informal interviews, documentation, artefacts, and diaries. This exegesis, therefore, asks whether the lived experiences of the characters in *Concrete Diamonds* have epistemic value within society. *Concrete Diamonds* explores the spectrum of socio-political and cultural change within a historical context, specifically relating to how dominant ideologies translate to the social ontology of women since the birth of civilization. Karl Marx stresses that “the more modern

³ Haralambos & Holborn *Sociology: Themes & Perspectives*, (2003, p. 805).

⁴ Critical research methods can take many forms including ethnography which, concerned with the study of people, can involve “observation, participatory observation, analysis of cultural and social artefacts, diaries and personal documents, life histories, key in-depth interviews, focus groups, discourse and language analyses” (Howell, K.E. *The Philosophy of Research Methodology*, (2013 pg. 120) Sage.

industry becomes developed ... differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working-class. All are instruments of labour, more or less expensive to use, according to their age or sex” (Marx & Engels 1884/1995: 88). This philosophy identifies both men, women, and children as tools of manipulation. However, *Concrete Diamonds* explores the multiple levels of domination imposed on working-class women particularly, as society’s patriarchal economic structures punish characters such as Crystal, whose limited options to submit to low and unpaid labour is essentially advantageous to the Capitalist state. As leading activist and founder of the Wages for Housework Campaign, Selma James (2021) points out, the liberal feminist ideal of going out to work to gain liberation has a very different meaning for working-class women, who are forced into low-paid work. Within the exploitative environment of the labour market, “man’s pay (if there is one) barely covered the family expenses” (James, S. 2021p. 56). As noted in the introduction of James’ book, *Our Time is Now: Sex, Race, Class, and Caring for People and Planet* Margaret Prescod states that like black women, working-class women, who keep their families together within the context of financial hardship and patriarchal domination within the home, community, and society, must raise children with scarce resources. They are more preoccupied with “demanding money from the state rather than competing with men for a career [which] was not considered feminist” within liberal feminist ideals (*ibid* pg. xii). Therefore, working-class women’s voices were not considered within feminist discourse. The character of Crystal is a lone parent who is branded a social deviant raising delinquent children. Via a nexus of neoliberal capitalist propaganda, Thatcher placed the functional role of the nuclear family at the heart of her rhetoric. Subsequently, the former prime minister’s contempt for single-parent families, believing them economic drains, was reflected in the lack of state support. While this approach to economic

policy might've benefitted a few, women like Crystal and millions of working-class people lived in abject poverty during the height of Thatcherism. Under Gordon Brown's socio-economic policies, women like Crystal would've received minimum wage, a top-up on her wages via Working Tax credits, as well as Working Family Tax credits to assist with childcare costs (all of which have been scaled back by the current Conservative Government austerity measures and replaced with Universal Credit which has led to thousands of working families being left in economic poverty). Instead, Crystal's roles as a barmaid and cleaner (ultimately extensions of undervalued *women's work*), with long hours and little pay, do not dovetail with the requirements of life as a single mother. Crystal prepares a processed meal of Smash and Spam for her children in their damp bedsit, whilst from the television, Margaret Thatcher preaches an ideological speech, promoting Christianity and the sanctity of marriage. She speaks of a parental duty to nourish children, referring to them as *Seeds of Goodness*. In this scene, the stark hypocrisy of neoliberal capitalist ideology is identified via the lens of economic poverty, illustrating how far-removed government policy is to the lives of society's most vulnerable. Class inequalities are further explored where comparisons are drawn with Girlo's best friend, Bambi: "Their house had seven-bedrooms which *all* belonged to the family ... Girlo's family only had one room between them." This provides a comparative analysis of class and extend to an in-depth exploration of the role of women. Despite her long-held dream of becoming an artist, Crystal's role is to comply with classist patriarchy mechanisms so that she might survive and keep her children alive. Whereas Bambi's mother has the luxury of artistic pursuit. She still fulfils the obligatory demands of *women's work*, but she doesn't have to deal with inequalities within the labour market and rely on extensions of *women's work* to the same extent as Crystal. Whether she makes money is irrelevant in this situation because,

unlike Crystal, she has conformed to the patriarchy, with a husband to support her, both of whom are beneficiaries of capitalism. Therefore, she has the economic freedom to do what she wants when she wants. These class differences shape social attitudes, which conflict with the social ontology of working-class life, exposing the hypocrisy and inadequacy of political ideology from the perspective of working-class women. However, there is a hint of dissatisfaction when (nameless) Bambi's mother refers to herself as the "mad woman in the attic," a reference to Jane Eyre, and the constraints put upon women who pushed the boundaries of social expectations. She also feels a sense of dislocation, as society presumes that she takes on the identity of her husband. Within her interiority, she views herself as independent from the imposed female role of Victorian-inspired, neoliberalist society. In this sense, Bambi's mother could also be considered *other* in relation to patriarchy.

c. Stylistic inspiration Due to the novel's theoretical and practical implications, the stylistic inspiration has a strong political focus, which is illustrated by the structural elements of my novel, symbolising the dialectic process whereby features from the past bleed into the present, which materialises into the future.

Urban Fiction or Brexit Lit? An Exploration of Post-industrial History in Britain.

The principal narrative element explores the life of an emerging poet within the context of working-class life in Britain, and deals with intersections between class struggle and feminism, highlighting the polarising, exploitative and negligent consequences of neoliberalist ideology within the communities of post-industrial Britain. If we look back over the past 38 years, particularly in terms of seismic social events, specifically: the breakdown of socialist Trade Unions; post-industrialisation; globalisation; rise in surveillance; digitalisation; commercialisation; Americanisation; the War on Terror; Islamophobia; the privatisation and

reduction of public services, housing, the NHS and the Welfare State; the demonization, criminalisation and marginalisation of the working-classes; standardisation of education; recession; Conservative-led austerity; the Windrush Scandal and deportation of Black and Ethnic Minority citizens; the rise of Donald Trump's contagious fascism; the demonization of people from Black and Ethnic Minority backgrounds; the dominance of digital technology, polarisation; the rise of Identity Politics and Cancel Culture; the global pandemic; Brexit; the Black Lives Matter and Violence Against Women protests; the growth in conspiracy theories and anti-vax campaigners, we can see that both Thatcherism and Blairism have left quite an ideological legacy, with each event contributing to the next within the dialectic process. Phenomenological hermeneutics comes into play regarding the principal narrative's subject matter as the researcher's interaction with the research encompasses both the past and present. In this respect, the above changes, based on past government policy, which has engineered undesirable societal changes for working-class people, have become the precursor for the supposedly *civilized, fair and free* nation that we live in today.

As an exposé of those who are powerless within the social strata (those who have experienced the brunt of such seismic changes), the principal element of *Concrete Diamonds* could be described as Urban Fiction, or perhaps more suitably, it may belong to the emerging genre of Brexit Lit. Prior to the global pandemic, *subcultural* working or *underclass*⁵ people were viewed as outsiders in mainstream society, labelled by the mass media as *scrounging chavs* etc. However, as living standards have lowered and access to the NHS/public services has become stretched, many ordinary people or *working poor*, living in austerity-stricken, pandemic Britain are beginning to feel the *subcultural* plight, which might be why literary genres such as Brexit Lit have expanded to include more sobering accounts of post-industrial,

⁵ Widely regarded derogatory terms within the critical theory community.

social realism in post-Brexit Britain. Author Barney Farmer's *Drunken Baker* (2018) fits the genre and strikes me as similar to a short story I wrote about a day in the life of a Welsh cocaine dealer in 'Jumping Jack Flash' (2009 p. 4). I instantly connected his style and content: his syntax is immediate; dialect is on point. The characters leap from the page, and his prose is peppered with dynamic verbs, obligatory expletives. It is heavily punctuated to reflect the disjointed mindset of the protagonists who are under the influence of escape-inducing substances. In addition, the novel is illustrated by *Viz* Comic cartoonist Dave Iddon. As a popular working-class dirty comic of the 1980s and 90s, the work appeals to a working-class audience. The underlying political message of the novel caught my interest, as *Drunken Baker* is set in a Northern post-industrial town in Britain and within the context of corporate domination, e.g., Tescopoly. The narrative follows the monotonous existence of two independent bakers who turn to the bottle to come to terms with their loss of livelihoods, purpose, and community. Farmer skilfully illustrates changes to the social landscape, lamenting a nostalgic community spirit, when "us young lads opened the gate and watched the lasses head down the factory for the early shift, whistling and giving 'em fags" (Farmer, B. 2018 pg. 41) and that "nobody had a pot to piss in 'cos they all worked there, generations of 'em"(*ibid* pg. 55) to show how high streets and working-class communities have become ghost towns, existing in the shadows of clinical, corporate giants, who target villages and towns to drive out independent retailers: "Gone now, Corner bakery. Went to one of them We Buy Gold lot for a bit, then one of them vapes. Then a different vapes. Then nothing" (*ibid* p. 51). Psycho-geographically speaking, this is a scene all too common in Britain's post-industrial towns and cities, significantly when, as a direct result of neoliberal ideology, including post-industrialisation, globalisation, Americanisation, and consumerism, McDonaldization has impacted society and identity on many levels. Developed by George Ritzer (2013), McDonaldization is the theory that the principals of specialised fast-food chains such as

McDonalds have dominated the globe. Principals such as efficiency, calculation, predictability, and control have come to define how society is organised for “efficiency, profit and high levels of regulation at the expense of freedom and creativity” (cited in Cante, S & Hardes, J 2021, p. 39).

It has been argued that within the climate of neoliberal capitalist individualism and culture of rapid social change, including technological advances, that the emergence of an increasingly risky, insecure gig economy, born of the 1990s, has contributed to society’s “ontological insecurity” (Cant, S & Hardes, J, 2021 p. 55) and mental illness. MacDonald & Giazitzoglu (2019) references earlier forms of entrepreneurial work as a forerunner for the gig economy. However, the attractive neoliberal idea of working on one’s own terms, for as long as one chooses, easily translates to the exploitation of society’s working poor (*ibid*), with a return to the levels of exploitation and poverty witnessed in Victorian Britain, with working-class people having to labour constantly under zero-hours contracts in an unpredictable gig economy, without Trade Union support, fought for by previous generations. Because of engrained neoliberal capitalist beliefs, the working-classes have been short-changed, and it could be said that there has been a regression in this area, as people have far fewer rights than fifty years ago, with increased numbers of working families living in abject poverty and now relying on food banks to survive.

In terms of social mobility and equal opportunity, most of the characters in *Concrete Diamonds* are restricted by their social realities; however, they utilize capitalism and find ways to survive, *working the system* as social deviants and outsiders. In *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963/2008), Howard S. Becker argues that deviance isn’t explicitly related to behaviour; it is how society labels a person whose conduct is outside of the norm, with some labels becoming self-perpetuating. However, such behaviour may not be deemed deviant within certain subcultures. Many behaviours, particularly criminal behaviour, have

positive connotations. Some cultures might view crime as an act of resistance and liberation from the mainstream, which has endeavoured to exclude and marginalise them. Blue-collar crimes such as prostitution and benefit fraud are therefore viewed as essential entrepreneurial pursuits within many working-class communities and cultures, especially when the economic constraints of austerity are omnipresent. *Concrete Diamonds* thus draws on a wealth of deviant, outsider, or *other* perspectives to challenge normalised mainstream stereotypes and negative representations of working-class identity. It's important to note that this novel element serves as a comment on the present situation and is, fundamentally, a practical application of the theory. It is not surprising that Girlo's artistic apprenticeship of *becoming* isn't coloured solely by literary influences. Still, instead, her politically charged lived experiences of social deprivation, economic hardship, social deviance, and crime provide the raw material for her radical praxis, which comes in the form of phallic concrete poems.

Phallic Concrete Poetry: A Proletarian Attack on Phallocratic Domination.

Girlo's introduction to the world of verse comes from working-class values, left-wing politics and is inspired by music. Influenced by the lyrics of emancipatory artists,⁶ which resonate more deeply than the state prescribed metaphysical poets found on her comprehensive school's GCSE syllabus, she writes directly from life experience, using the vernacular with which she feels comfortable. Inspiration stemmed from the work of working-class rappers Eddie Otchere and Andrew Green, who penned the cult novel, *Junglist* (2021), which, due to the present woke political climate, has recently been republished for a new audience. *Junglist* tells the story of four young black men coming of age in 1990s rave culture, a multi-cultural scene initially founded on solidarity for the music and ecstasy. Anti-discriminatory by its

⁶ Tupac Shakur, Bob Marley, Tracy Chapman, UB40, Joan Armatrading.

nature, the rave scene evolved from the political resistance of the 1980s and Two-tone music of ska and reggae. In a BBC Radio 4 *Book of the Week* interview (2021), Otchere talks about a free-flowing form of writing rooted in his work as a hip-hop lyricist. He understands words as a stream of consciousness that ride over the beats. In this sense, it could be said that the music and sounds of the street are Girlo's source of inspiration, replicated by her environment, i.e., the tapping on the pipes in the police cell or the buzzing of the drill as a poem materialises. Otchere also speaks of being submerged in his environment whilst writing, referencing writing on the bus or train after a night out. In terms of Girlo's lived experience, the same immersive experience applies. However, for women like Pearl or Alice, living in the 1960s and 70s, their role as women was consigned to the kitchen or the bedroom. Their experience of public life was considerably gendered and segregated. In the poem, *A Hand to Play*, I write for like Christine Keeler, who sought social mobility via sexual objectification. A working-class woman exploited by those in positions of power, Keeler was then vilified and scapegoated for her role in public life, portrayed in the media as a prostitute and a scarlet woman for her involvement in the Profumo Affair (1963). Unfortunately, such instances are not relegated to the history books, with, among other examples, the recent Stormy Daniels and Donald Trump scandal coming to light in 2018.

In terms of typography, each poem acts as a punctuated stamp, marking each period of growth, as Girlo comes closer to breaking down the walls between social ontology and historical realism. The subjects are radical and serve to attack phallographic dominance, including the phallographic nature of language and discourse. French novelist and feminist writer Helene Cixous (1981) understands language as key to gender difference. Coining the term *phallographic*, Cixous attributes the form and content of language as concerned primarily with male sexuality, namely the penis, and highlights how women are still

“threatened by the big dick ... still impressed by the commotion of the phallic stance.”⁷ Girlo poems are, therefore, a striking satirical comment on phallocentricity. In addition, her poetry is graphitised, either crayoned, scratched, or spray-painted. While locked up in the cell, Girlo scratches *I am Vodka* into the “state-issued mattress,” vowing that when she is free, she’ll “spray paint it all over town, all over the big-dick statues and skyscrapers so that everyone could see her, hear her voice, know her existence.” This act of defacing the structures of patriarchy illustrates Girlo’s defiance of the very system that has endeavoured to lock her, and women like her, up! As the novel progresses, the poems push through their concrete lines, breaking down the boundaries that the penis and scientific objectivity place on society. Therefore, the poems are mini graffiti artworks resonant with punk culture zines and satirical odes to the street, which act as signature pieces and striking mouthpieces for those enslaved, exploited or silenced by the neoliberal capitalist system.

⁷ Cited in Harralambos & Holborn (2004, p. 117).

2. Methodology: A Philosophical Framework of Analysis

“It is true, as Marx says, that history does not walk on its head, but it is also true that it does not think with its feet. Or one should say rather that it is neither its ‘head’ nor its ‘feet’ that we have to worry about, but its body.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962/1999 p. xxi).

As *Concrete Diamonds* focuses on Marxist feminist issues, this exegesis applies a sociological, as well as a philosophical, method of analysis. Using phenomenological hermeneutics and feminist discourse analysis, it reveals the discursive ways in which working-class experiences are systematically devalued as legitimate sources of knowledge within the ideological structures of society. Drawing on realism and interpretivism, it seeks to reveal the hidden discourses of sexism, racism, and classism, which define and control people’s lives. Thus, this exegesis is grounded in a critical theory paradigm of inquiry which, characterised by a hermeneutical approach, is primarily concerned with “critically disputing actual social realities” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 144); seeking to evaluate social ontology from a Marxist feminist perspective. Critical theorists see reality as a social product that has been shaped by history and formed by dominant values which have been built upon and instilled over time. Within this paradigm, the methodology aims to be vigorous because knowledge is fluid: it is a process in which we move towards a better understanding of the social world. Critical theorist Kerry E. Howell (2013) highlights the interconnected nature of ontology and epistemology (2013, p. 120), so it’s important to dig beneath the “occidental complacency” (*ibid* p. 77) of dominant ideas. And, because critical theory exists as a “continually evolving dialectical set of ideas ... ruling elites and ideologies should be challenged, as well as greater equality and liberty sought” (*ibid*). One way to achieve greater liberty is via the documentation,

analysis and sharing of the historical and sociological roots of exploitation and oppression. As a subject of my history, the novel *Concrete Diamonds* aims to connect critical theory with everyday life, fostering “a method of conscientisation”⁸ in the pursuit of a “new artistic pathway to greater emotional and human understanding.”⁹ Within this context, *Concrete Diamonds* could be viewed as a vehicle for greater emotional and human understanding. Still, in terms of Marxist theory, it could also be considered feminist praxis, which seeks to inspire social change. Research is concerned with discovery and change. If critical theory recognises our reality (social ontology) as being shaped by history, with collective values distilled over time, then such values contribute to a shared historical realism that informs theory. Praxis is the relationship between theory and practice. It is not an instinctive, basic function; praxis induces social change. For this to occur, the researcher/investigator/historian/social scientist/novelist/poet/playwright must be a reflexive participant in the social world to inform what knowledge can be discovered (epistemology). As outlined in *A Dictionary of Marxist of Thought* (1983/1991), social change is informed by the dialectic process, which is in a constant state of motion. Hegel invented the concept, understanding dialectics to achieve rational thinking; however, Marx adapted the idea and applied a “triadic schema” (*ibid*, p. 143) to the progression of social change, after which he cites three key phases:

1. The Thesis or the status-quo.
2. The Antithesis or opposition to the status-quo and include mechanisms for change be it people, ideas, movements, or books. Such mechanisms create a clash or revolution, thereby becoming a vehicle for social change.
3. Synthesis is achieved via praxis, where experiential meets theoretical and progress

⁸ A Marxist concept by Paulo Freire, whereby action is taken against the oppressive mechanisms in a person’s life, that have been illuminated by understanding. It’s about gaining an in-depth understanding of the world whilst recognising social and political contractions between the oppressed and oppressors. Cited in *The Sage Encyclopaedia of Action Research*.

⁹ Cited in *A Rough Guide to Writing the Exegesis Essay*, Britton, D. J.

is achieved.

Another way to understand Marx's *triadic schema* of the dialectic process is through past, present, and future lenses. Within the context of the creative work *itself*, the grandmothers' lives could be understood as the thesis. The reality exposed via Girlo's lived experiences could be considered the antithesis. The practical application of critical theory and lived experience synthesizes to form Girlo's Concrete Poetry or praxis. It could be said that within the context of the exegesis, the thesis consists of a critically theoretical hypothesis generated by an opposition to the status-quo; the antithesis is a rejection of such systems, and, with critical theory applied, this synthesizes into the creative work or radical praxis: *Concrete Diamonds*.

A researcher must be imaginative and able to make links between "personal troubles, triumphs and truths, and the broader social structures" (Cant & Hardes, 2021 p. 142) to make an original contribution to human knowledge. This understanding allows for unique discoveries to unfold. In addition, being "conceptual, rigorous, knowledgeable and reflexive" (*ibid*) are also notable characteristics. Essentially, reflexivity is the practice of interrogating your assumptions: understanding, analysing and evaluating "yourself as an active participant in the thinking and research process" (*ibid* p. 129). By its very nature, reflexivity is part of the human condition. Not to be confused with being reflective, reflexive practice is an action-orientated process, which examines the role of the researcher within the research process. If we use the metaphor of a travelling funfair's House of Mirrors, we can better understand the complex nature of reflexivity. If you can imagine various mirrors that reflect your image in a multitude of distortions, sizes, directions and forms, a researcher must be willing and able to "hold up multiple mirrors to their own practice" (*ibid* p. 128). In this sense, reflexivity asks the researcher to acknowledge how their value systems shape their work and how to put that work into relevant contexts for critical evaluation. Allowing space for various perspectives or mirrors

provides “an appreciation of positionality” (*ibid* p. 129) whereby critical reflection is essential not *just* for the researcher, who ask themselves *why* they were drawn to a particular topic and *which* theoretical perspectives they adopted, but also to ask questions of the discipline itself, “allowing us to revisit and rewrite ideas and history” (*ibid*), for the discovery of new pathways for academic and artistic inquiry.

2.1. A Phenomenological Approach

“Knowledge generation occurs in the horizons created through perception; perception is not simply another fact noted in the world because it is the very situation that cannot be explained or filled in providing a full picture of the world. Perception is the very gap which we ourselves are, and by which it comes into existence for someone, (it) is the flaw in this great diamond.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962/1999, p. 207).

Phenomenology is the study of lived experience from the perspectives of those who live it. Essentially the antithesis to scientific objectivity, which defines knowledge using boundaries, classification and physical laws, phenomenology seeks to investigate social phenomena from various past and present perspectives. Early sociologists, such as Émile Durkheim, attempted to use a scientific positive approach to classify and measure the social world. However, according to phenomenology, subjectivity is far too great¹⁰ because, as human beings, we make sense of the world by imposing personal understanding and meaning upon it.

¹⁰ In 1897, functionalist sociologist, Durkheim attempted to classify the phenomena of suicide. He wanted to explain aspect of suicide where psychology failed. However, as suicide is considered a sin within the Roman Catholic Church, his findings were not credible, as family members of the deceased concealed to the true nature of the deaths. (H & H 2003 p. 795-97).

Husserl speaks of a “genesis of meaning” where “criticism must be pursued at all levels ... its significance goes beyond, and there is no pure accident in existence or in co-existence, since both absorb random events and transmute them into the rational” (1962/1999 pg. xxii).

Whereas scientific positivism uses a system of classification to argue that an external reality exists, and we just observe it, existential phenomenologists understand reality as an ongoing process, incorporating the internal and external and vice versa. Martin Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty both questioned *where* or *when* the internal becomes external, highlighting an *interactive process*, where there is no point at which reality is either internal or external. As classification is universal, with people making decisions every day about classifying things, it is safe to say that such decisions are products of social processes, prompting phenomenologists to insist that it is impossible to choose *some* systems of classification as superior to others. For example, it is futile to use police crime statistics which suggests that if you are born into a working-class family, you succumb to a life of crime, because such figures can only illustrate *how* crime is defined and classified. Rather than asking what criminal actions had been carried out, phenomenology asks *why* such criminal acts have been carried out, emphasizing the importance of meaning and the social construction of reality, with phenomenologists paying particular attention to the subjective parts of social life.

In *Phénoménologie De La Perception* (1962/1999), Merleau-Ponty asserts that human existence involves a continual revision of ideas, as existence “does not admit to the sheer notion of fact, for it is only through existence that the facts are manifested” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1997 p. 7). However, existential feminist Simone de Beauvoir contests that there are some “conditions without which the very fact of existence would seem impossible” (1949/1997 p. 7). Suppose your existence is manipulated by a social ontology rooted in an ideology that doesn’t recognise your historical reality or knowledge as a valuable epistemic contribution. In that case, it could be argued that your worldview has been falsified, essentially becoming what

de Beauvoir refers to as: “mutilated and immanent, susceptible to falsification, self-deception, and subjugation” in what she refers to as “bad faith” (Elliott, 2011, p. 34). de Beauvoir also states that we all exist in dualities (which affects the perception of ourselves and the world) as we are individuals, but, at the same time, we are members of a group; and we are *both* subject and object (*ibid*). If such dualities are interactive processes, the research and writing process is a reflexive interaction that informs and transforms human consciousness.

Unlike interpretivism, phenomenological hermeneutics relates to the idea that rules or procedures or classification systems are not the basis of *understanding* and that it is the fundamental essence of being human; therefore, “understanding is interpretation” (Ricouer, 2004, p. 194). The idea of hermeneutics comes from the Greek myth that Hermes, the messenger of the Greek gods, “could interpret and explain their wishes” (Howell, 2013, p. 154). Hermeneutics derives from the Greek word *hermeneuin*, which means to interpret, but within scholarly research, the term has come to be understood as a method to “clarify issues under analysis” (*ibid*). That said, Hermes was also regarded as a trickster and would “convey falsehoods”, representing “the misleading as well as clarifying the relationship between humanity and the phenomenon or the world” (*ibid*). This conveyance of falsehoods is what de Beauvoir means when she speaks of *bad faith*: women or people from marginalised groups cannot interpret their lives as active agents because they are consigned to object status. They are something that is acted upon and ultimately considered a second-class citizen or an outsider.

Post-structuralist Lisa Tuttle states that if feminist revisionist methodology “asks new questions of old texts” (1986, pg. 164), then feminist hermeneutics interprets literature from a feminist perspective. Broadly speaking, feminist hermeneutics is informed by feminist critique, which, led by feminist politics, strives to interpret the language of literature. By exploring the social/political/economic/psychological subtexts of literature (Tuttle, 1986 p. 184), feminist critical theory serves to alter the hegemonic implications of texts within the literary canon. As

an exclusive list of literary masterpieces, the literary canon fails to adequately represent female authors, with some historical periods not including a *single* female author. Essentially, feminist literary criticism attacks the institutionalism of literature to reveal the literary canon's classist, racist and homophobic elitism. Marxist feminists deconstruct the canon within the context of the historically constituted relationship between production and consumption (Humm, M., 1995 p. 29). According to literary theorist Peter Barry (2002), early feminist criticism is found in the works of George Eliot and Virginia Woolf. They were concerned primarily with the authorship and representation of women in literature. However, like 2019 Booker Prize winner Bernadine Evaristo (2021), who highlights that “many British writers claim [the above] as literary influences, as a very young woman [she] was writing against them” (2021 p. 157). Like Bernadine, it was the work of Black American female authors such as Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, and Maya Angelou, who resonated far more deeply than white middle-class authors, who failed to represent the hidden narratives of working-class life. Today, post-structural feminism highlights the importance of understanding different social meanings of gender via language and discourse, which is characterised by the ways of thinking and talking about society, rather than within the context of material reality. In this sense, both men and women are abstract representations¹¹ that can only be studied via texts, therefore lived experiences, conveyed via texts, becomes a key feature of epistemic contribution. Grounded in science and developed by Eurocentric patriarchy, objective scientific inquiry was the dominant form of epistemological investigation which supported the status-quo of the Enlightenment period. As a branch of existentialism, phenomenology became its antithesis, and over the years, it has been developed by critical theorists who represent the interests of the oppressed outsider. As science attempts to discover things within the boundaries of the world, constrained by physical laws, positivist scientific objectivity cannot be applied to the study of social phenomena. Such

¹¹ Within *Concrete Diamonds* such abstract representations are identified.

laws of science do not and cannot “exhaust experience or replace history or the events that occur in the actual courses of individual lives. Events are denser than any possible scientific description” (Lodge, 2003 p. 10).

“The past, he reflected, had not merely been altered, it had been actually destroyed. For, how could you establish even the most obvious fact when there existed no record outside your own memory?”

George Orwell (1978, p. 115)

In *Consciousness and the Novel: Connected Essays*, David Lodge (2003) speaks of qualia, a quality or property perceived or experienced by a person. However, qualia are subjective, and within poetry, the use of language is “arguably man’s most successful effort to describe qualia” (2003, p. 10); still, it is “imprecise and is only comprehensible when put into the context of the poet’s personal life” (*ibid* p. 11-12). There are many examples of qualia in *Concrete Diamonds*, which highlight the specificity of values within working-class history and culture. Crime, for instance, is a prevalent theme, which has an entirely different meaning within mainstream society. Perhaps the scenes where Girlo escapes her grim reality by using alcohol or substances provide perceptual experiences; these doors of perception captured in prose give the reader a phantasmagorical insight into her subconscious and external world.¹² We all have different perceived histories; fiction has the scope to explore “the dense specificity” (*ibid*) of uniquely perceived realities and the “experience of individual human beings moving through space and time” (*ibid* pg. 10). Lodge understands literature as an

¹² When Girlo takes magic mushrooms, she sees “her nail varnish had become a smattering of broken countries. On one thumb, there was a country shaped like a pig’s head, riddled with decay and dissolution and on the other, was a city ... trains and motorways of micro-people — self-contained and state-tamed — who believed they had *very* important things to do and had *very* important places to be.” Making a distinction between post-industrial Wales (pig’s head) and London centralism.

essential “record of human consciousness” (*ibid*) and is the “richest and most comprehensive we have” (*ibid*). He identifies differences between literary and scientific discourse surrounding consciousness, questioning: *Why does literature exist? Why do we need it? Why do we value it?* ... all valid questions rigorously examined in George Orwell’s chilling *1984* (1945/1978), where language is reduced to Newspeak, rendering thought and consciousness obsolete.

In his conception of a totalitarian dystopian reality, Orwell presents a world where literary pursuits are illegal, history is forged, and the human experience becomes utilitarian and homogenised: a new order to support the *Ingsoc*¹³ ideology of party leader, Big Brother. In the place of freedom of thought, a system of *Doublethink*¹⁴ governs the Ministry of Truth’s Records Department, which deems “all history palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed exactly as often as was necessary” (Orwell, 1945/1978, p. 118), the result of which was the “ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you have just performed” (*ibid* p. 114). Despite the bleak circumstances of central character Winston’s existence — where he, himself, has been classified and categorised as a number — a relationship between subject and object still exists, and as an interactive process, Winston still has *some* level of autonomy over his work.¹⁵ He has the option to select what remains in existence and what he cancels. When he retains the photograph of Goldstein, his action to preserve a piece of history, the act affects the present and can therefore affect the future. Despite the “delicate pieces of forgery in which you had nothing to guide you except your knowledge of the principles on *Ingsoc* and your estimate of what the Party wanted you to say” (*ibid* p. 121), mirroring the practices of ‘investigative’ journalism today, he believes he has the power to affect the course of history. He has human yearnings to write the little memories he possesses, and therefore the potential to be

¹³ Oldspeak for English Socialism (1978, p. 115).

¹⁴ “To be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies” (1978 p. 114).

¹⁵ In our social reality, Winston’s work could be considered ‘investigative’ journalism.

instrumental in shaping human history. If he could only be free of the pervasive totalitarianism of Big Brother. Neo-Marxist, Antonio Gramsci believed that human history is ultimately shaped by economic structures and the social class system, and he “makes the source of hegemony in a capitalist society very clear: that ‘the spontaneous consent’ given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group,” (Holborow, 2015, p. 5). Thereby perpetuating the dominant ideology that the population is a collection of “individual entrepreneurs” (*ibid*) and “human capitals” (*ibid*) which are devices to “linguistically ‘manufacture’ neoliberalist consent” (*ibid*). This dominant ideology is then disseminated via a nexus of genre-specific propagandistic communication channels (similar to those featured in *1984*), thereby forming an omnipotent platform of unchallenged *common sense*. The embourgeoisement of society has rendered those considered *others as outsiders or deviants* within mainstream society, with their “personalities, behaviours, and cultural beings overshadowing their true value as an individual” (Collins, 1986 pg. 14), and they become the outsider within.

2.2 Feminist Hermeneutics

Concerning women’s knowledge, social epistemology is narrowly understood through the malestream,¹⁶ and feminist critical theorists assert that women’s history has been largely marginalised or misrepresented. Feminist hermeneutics examines women’s knowledge and asks how the “knowledge women produce about themselves is different to that of the dominant patriarchy, thereby seeking to understand what women know from a woman’s perspective.” (Bartowski et al., 2005 p. 42). Feminist theorists subscribe to feminist standpoint knowledge, which looks to replace the male perspective from *nowhere* within an epistemology “which expels the view from women’s lives” (*ibid*). Hilary Rose (1986) defines the origins of feminist

¹⁶ Malestream refers to the fact that early sociological enquiry is heavily influenced by the narrow perspective of men.

epistemology as women's lived experience and centres on the "domains of interconnectedness and affectual rationality" (Humm, M. 1995 p. 79), with feminist theorist Vickers (1983) defining feminist epistemology as having five basic principles.¹⁷ In this exegesis, I focus on the contextualisation of knowledge and necessary human agency. It is within feminist hermeneutics that the Master-slave dialectic is critical. Central to Hegel's philosophical approach, in his landmark work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, (1977) he presents the understanding of self-consciousness as related to *other*. Within this context, there are two bodies seeking recognition in what Hegel refers to as a "life-and-death struggle: each subject wishes to be the sole centre of active universality and to risk all in asserting his claims" (Hegel: 1977 p. xvii). When analysing the standpoints of slaves and their masters in 1807, he concluded that the master-slave arrangement is concerned with: "people's 'belonging' positions, and how groups affect how people receive knowledge and power" (Griffin, 2009, p. 441). In the context of *Concrete Diamonds*, the character of Girlo is often presented as a slave within her social roles: the abused child, the impoverished best friend, the state captive, the damaged girlfriend, the brothel receptionist, the sexualised cleaner, the live-in sugar babe, the chav student, etc. However, her determination to achieve autonomy through the pursuit of education, self-reflection and evaluation puts her on the path to attaining necessary human agency. Concerning women having 'necessary human agency,' de Beauvoir presents the idea of feminine qualities as products of a social construct, which have been created in a calculated way to remove women's subjectivity and ensure they remain enslaved. As *object* and *subject* are interrelated (one can't exist without the other), there is an apparent tension between the two. Therefore, de Beauvoir attributes two collections of behaviours associated with *object* and *subject*.

1. Transcendence, which is the domain of the subject who strives for freedom, imposes

¹⁷ The contextualisation of knowledge; Necessary human agency; Predominant causality; The intersubjective process and interactive process; Scientific diversity or multi-formed regularities. Cited in Humm, M (1995).

their will upon the world, educates themselves about freedom, has a strong voice and reaches out into the world. Such qualities are associated with men.

2. Imminence, which is associated with the object and is stagnant, passive, submissive, modest, and voiceless which are the qualities thrust upon women.¹⁸

Because women aren't their true *selves* within a philosophical sense: a woman is viewed as *other*. Post-modernist feminist Martha Nussbaum (1995, p. 257) identifies several ways to objectify a woman, which include:

1. *Instrumentality* – use women as a tool for a particular purpose.
2. *Denial of autonomy* – treat women as though they lack in autonomy or self-determination.
3. *Inertness* – treat women as if they lack in agency or activity.
4. *Fungibility* – to treat women as if they are interchangeable.
5. *Violability* – women with a lack of boundary integrity in relation to other objects. I think this could apply to the sexual abuse Girlo is subjected to in childhood.
6. *Ownership* – treat women as if another owns them, i.e., bought and sold.
7. *Denial of Subjectivity* – treatment of woman where her subjectivity (the way they view the world) is removed.¹⁹

In 2009, Rae Langton added another three to Nussbaum's list²⁰, including.

8. *Reduction to Body*: identify women with their body/body parts.
9. *Reduction to Appearance*: treat women solely with how they look/appear to the senses.
10. *Silencing*: do not permit women and girls to speak, to identify and express their

¹⁸ Cited from *Philosophize This!* 'Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*,' (2017).

¹⁹ Cited from the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

²⁰ (*ibid*).

experience, thoughts, or feelings

Within *Concrete Diamonds*, the above objectification techniques are all-encompassing, co-dependent, and far-reaching, applying to *all* the female characters in one form or another, at one time or another, which is internalised within the collective psyche. Given that the relationship between men and women is often “symbiotic ... with women assigned to homemaker and men, breadwinners, men have asserted an economic monopoly,”²¹ which has impacted interpersonally, socially, politically, culturally, and epistemologically. As a result, Girlo’s position within society was established long before she was even born. Her cultural, personal, and social instrumentality comes from being a tool for sexual pleasure, domestic service, child-rearing, and caring roles. Her early role models either succumb or try to fight the denial of their autonomy. To some extent, *all* the women in *Concrete Diamonds* are owned directly by men or indirectly by the patriarchy.

Historically, women of all races and sexual orientations have become enslaved to the needs of the patriarch, with their subjectivity removed on many levels. But through her gradual emancipation and subsequent transcendence, Girlo comes to understand that subjectivity takes work and that to release herself as a passive object, she must apply phenomenological hermeneutics and feminist discourse analysis to discover the worlds of *others* who exist in the margins of restrictive heterosexual and White Supremacist, malestream thought.²²

²¹ Evolved from the idea that economic prosperity is related to physical strength. Cited from *Philosophize This!* Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, (2017).

²² Ultimately founded on a history of patriarchal, colonial, and imperialist power and dominance.

3. Literature Review

This chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive literature review, highlighting critical theories and concepts whilst drawing upon relevant standpoints and key sources to discuss significant issues and debates surrounding the epistemic marginalisation of working-class voices. It will consider the changing landscapes of the sociological influences, subject matter, and stylistic inspiration for *Concrete Diamonds*. *Concrete Diamonds* includes lived experiences within a theoretical context as radical praxis, highlighting discrepancies of legitimate power associated with specific social statuses. Yet as Ralf Dahrendorf states, in *Class, & Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959), it will avoid the assumption that class membership is “derived from the incumbency of a social role” (1959, p. 148-9), therefore utilising critical theory to “interpret historical epochs to trace meaning via epistemes²³ which transform and develop to become part of the wider discourse” (Howell, 2013 p. 168). *Concrete Diamonds* is, therefore, a semi-autobiographical novel, which invites the reader to participate in the conversation regarding the social, cultural, political, and epistemological inequalities between master and slave in its many guises. Such distinctions focus on power distribution and may be attributed to Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel’s Master-slave dialectic.²⁴

3.1. Sociological Influences

“There is an integrity to a story that comes from a real life lived. A story is clearly illuminated from being raised up in it ... It is learned through assimilation, through living in its proximity

²³ Changes in history.

²⁴ The Master-slave dialectic is central to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophical approach, whereby understanding self-consciousness is related to “other.”²⁴ Within this context, there are two bodies seeking recognition, within what Hegel calls the “Life-and-death struggle: each subject wishes to be the sole centre of active universality and to risk all in asserting his claims.” (Hegel, G.W.F, *Philosophy of Spirit*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977 p. xvii).

with those who know it, live it, and teach it.”

Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1992, p. 467).

Whilst combing through the piles of commentary on feminist thought, I came across a gem of a book: *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths & Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (Pinkola Estés. C, 1992). The first words, “Wildlife and Wild Woman are both endangered species” (*ibid* pg. 1), instantly struck a chord with me: I no longer felt like an outsider, nor an imposter. The *wildish nature of feral woman* Pinkola Estés promotes in her enriching seminal work liberated me from the stifling labels of *Damaged Goods*, *Sex on Legs* or *Good Girl*.²⁵ It encouraged me to not only reclaim the story of my foremothers but to appreciate its value within the contemporary feminist discourse and to celebrate the diversity, ingenuity, and fortitude of working-class women. Dr. Clarrissa Pinkola Estés is an award-winning poet, best-selling author, and senior Jungian psychologist, who reveals that within the feminine psyche, there is a *wild woman*, highlighting that women’s creativity, passion and ageless knowing has been repressed for centuries, and that “emotional truth, intuitive wisdom and instinctual self-confidence” (*ibid*) has been trivialised by patriarchal domination. As a cantadora,²⁶ she fiercely advocates that “the spiritual world of Wild Women, have, throughout history, been plundered or burnt and natural cycles forced into unnatural rhythms to please others,” and by *others*, I believe she means those in positions of patriarchal power. This sentiment is echoed in *Concrete Diamonds*’ opening chapter, *Vodka*, where Girlo is physically and metaphorically locked up in a cell.²⁷ The repetition of “back in the cell” represents punitive structural measures used against fierce women seeking liberation.

²⁵ Chapter titles cited in Howell, G. J, *Concrete Diamonds*.

²⁶ A keeper of stories in the Latina tradition (Pinkola Estés, C. 1992, *preface*).

²⁷ In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir states: “men have presumed to create a feminine domain ... only in order to lock up women therein” (1949/1977, p. 73).

*“She’d gone barefoot again ... sleepwalked into another attempt to fill the rotten void, which over the years had become fertile land for the perverse appetites of more powerful others.”*²⁸

The image of Girlo’s bare feet provokes a *wildish nature*, with *fertile land* referring to humankind’s progression from nomads to farmers, and is a nod to de Beauvoir, who blames labour divisions on the acquisition of land. As such, women have been relegated to the domestic sphere, rendering them insignificant “in comparison to man’s productive labour” (1949/1977 p. 61). Within a primitive economic environment and the context of women’s biological requirements, she also comments that, women, *themselves* have been complicit in their submissiveness, identifying them as “the prey of the species” (*ibid*). It is this position of being *prey* that Girlo rejects because, within the feminine domain, the requirement to be a “proper and silent” (Pinkola Estés, 1992 pg. 224) sex object, wife or mother does not marry well with Girlo’s nature. She comes of age during a post-feminist, 1990s ladette culture, under the tutelage of radical feminist and 1960s non-conformist bohemian Nannie Pearl: an ardent socialist feminist and Welsh matriarch to a ‘son strong’ family from the post-industrial South Wales valleys. Therefore, Girlo’s working-class, feminist values conflict with the hypocrisy of a pervasive hegemonic patriarch that shapes social ontology and distorts her sense of self. This duality of existence fosters a deeply rooted inner turmoil. Still, Girlo’s staunch non-conformity to the oppressive mechanisms of the malestream characterises her journey to reclaim her creative spirit, voice, and artistry whilst contributing to the emancipation of working-class women. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, female identity became primarily sexualised, with a rise in hyper-sexualisation rooted in ladette culture; a forerunner for what Ariel Levy (2005) refers to as raunch culture in her book *Female Chauvinist pigs: Women & the Rise of the Raunch Culture*, where she comments on how women are objectified, objectify each other and

²⁸ Chapter 1. *Vodka*.

are encouraged to objectify themselves. This is highlighted by the sexist lexis used to describe many of the female characters: “her perky little arse,” “pink nipples and a gold nose stud,” “all kitted out in a Lycra dress and heels.” Levy highlights that the invention of the contraceptive pill initially liberated women (especially working-class women like Nannie Pearl, who were deemed baby-making machines); however, she advocates that the easy availability of contraception became a symbol of sexual availability to men, rather than women’s liberation. In this sense, she suggests that by having a new role to play, women have consented to their sexual oppression, “perverting women’s liberation and empowerment” to simply create a “new norm” (2005, p. 200). This new norm is portrayed in the opening chapters of *Concrete Diamonds*, where Girlo’s ‘sexual liberation’ leads to state incarceration. Sexual liberation in the 2000s ladette culture was characterised by choice, hedonism, and individualism, all of which leave Girlo feeling alienated, denigrated, and conflicted. Consent and rape are key feminist issues that arose from this movement, highlighted during the chapters set in the 00s. Girlo’s childhood took place when misogyny and the sexual oppression of women were historically accepted by society.

During her journey of *becoming*, Girlo encounters challenges, which she deals with by relying on alcohol/substances, their toxic repercussions only serving to exacerbate feelings of self-hatred and alienation. However, she finds a sense of belonging within the internal and external darkness, which becomes a conduit for her writing. The creative expression, as crystallisations of her existence, define her as a poet. Although disadvantaged by the *Matrix of Domination* (2006) she tries to find spiritual enlightenment, to feed her “hungry ghost”²⁹ — a void forged by childhood abuse and maternal neglect. Within *Concrete Diamonds*, the hungry

²⁹ *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction* (2011) Dr. Gabor Mate highlights how society views drug and alcohol addiction as a criminal problem, something that can be solved by law. As such, people who are addicts are subject to stigmatisation. However, Dr. Mate advocates that childhood trauma is responsible for addiction, as people try to feed their ‘Hungry Ghost’ with drugs or alcohol in order to self-medicate and nullify the symptoms of PTSD. He also points to other forms of addiction such as shopping, or sex or gambling and believes that Capitalism itself creates a void within us all, by which we have to fill with external pleasures, offered to us by consumerism.

ghost appears symbolically as The White Monkey,³⁰ or the primal beast within, who, responsible for the “soul famine of her creative spirit” (Pinkola Estés, 1992 p. 224) haunts her throughout the narrative but ultimately shapes herstory.³¹ As Pinkola Estés, and Girlo’s working-class roots affirm, “the healing medicine of story does not exist in a vacuum. It cannot exist divorced from its spiritual source ... it thrives only on hard work – intellectual, spiritual, familial, physical, and integral” (1992 p. 466-7).

According to de Beauvoir, such work means striving for freedom in everything that you do. She believes that it is our responsibility to understand the reasons behind what we do, to live authentically and rigorously, and take inventory of our thoughts to free those thoughts from the self-imposed chains of the world.³² Through the act of authentically living, philosophising, and writing, Girlo does this; undertaking a quest to discover her hidden self, rather than being a passenger in the malestream. In the miasma of neoliberal capitalist engineered hedonism, she tried to tune into the ancestral nature of the *wild woman* archetype and began to understand that she was not born female; she was *made* female. She was not born passive she was *made* passive. She was not born a slave; she was *made* a slave.

“Woman’s awareness of herself is not defined exclusively by her sexuality; it reflects a situation that depends upon the economic organisation of society, which in turn indicates what stage of technical evolution mankind has attained.” Simone de Beauvoir, (1949/1997, p. 59).

In *The Second Sex* (1949/1997), de Beauvoir states that “humanity is not an animal species, it is a historical reality”³³ (1949/1997 p. 59), and she attributes the inequality of power

³⁰ The White Monkey is a folktale from the Rock in the Rhymney Valley.

³¹ According to *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, herstory is women’s history. It is the theory and documentation of the historical and contemporary lives of women. (Humm, M. 1995, p. 119).

³² Cited from *Philosophize This!* Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, (2017).

³³ Historical reality is something that is not fixed or to be viewed from a singular perspective.

relations to economic organisation, which “predicates women as merely sexual organisms” (*ibid*). Within this context, de Beauvoir recognises that both women and the proletariat are intrinsically linked: “thus the fate of the woman and that of socialism are intimately bound together” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1997 pg. 61). She uses the example of humankind’s progression from nomads to settlers to prove her point. When hunter-gatherer society invented new tools, we moved away from a clan mentality (when women were revered and could inherit land) to a society founded on land and private property where man, the “master of slaves and of the earth” (*ibid*), became “the proprietor also of woman” (*ibid*). According to de Beauvoir, it was at this moment in history that women became “closely enslaved to the species” (*ibid*). This movement from clan mentality, de Beauvoir states, was the “great historical defeat of the feminine sex” (*ibid*), with such economic oppression instigating the “social oppression to which she is subjected” (*ibid*).

Scholar and activist Lynda Scott (2021) echoes this sentiment, asserting that that “a woman cannot *own* property, because she *is* property” (2021, p. 100). In the chapter, *For Love, Not Money*, Scott refers to the position of women in Ghana but draws connections between “human forger societies” (*ibid*) and patriarchal “roots in its earliest forms of exchange” (2021, p. 101). Her incisive work, *The Double X Economy* (2021) highlights the global economic cost of gender equality using nomad or hunter-gatherer economies as an example of modern-day human trafficking and slavery as the practice of women being traded with or *as* goods has shaped the foundations of a patriarchal economy. Scott also makes a fascinating point, criticising the foundational claim that the social structure is inherently patriarchal. Darwin’s theory of evolution, which links the origins of humankind to apes, or more specifically chimpanzees, is fundamentally flawed, Scott states. She examines the primate behaviour of chimpanzees, such as a rigid social hierarchy, survival of the fittest ethos and aggressive tactics (behaviours which have distilled and crystalized over time to form the foundations of social

ontology), which have partly been responsible for the subjugation of women. Scott also draws her readers' attention to the primate culture of the Bonobos. They are an egalitarian, matriarchal primate culture that rarely uses aggression and solve disputes with sex rather than war (Scott, 2021). Along with a new wave of scientific thought, Scott ascertains that the human species is more closely related to the DNA of Bonobos than chimpanzees, thereby undermining the claim for an evolutionary patriarchal organisation of societal structures. From a feminist hermeneutical perspective, it is also interesting to note that Bonobos are described as pygmy chimpanzees, reducing their status per male-centric qualities of height and strength. Such physical attributes and masculine behaviours are widely recognised as a decisive factor in the origins of gender inequality, which also carry the hallmarks of chimpanzee culture, from which we all supposedly evolved. In the same way that subcultures exist in the margins of mainstream society, *Concrete Diamonds* portrays subcultures in the margins of male-dominated cultures in society, which despite individualistic preoccupations associated with socioeconomic status, beauty, and marital status, promotes an ethos of communitarianism and solidarity (underdogs of the *underdogs in arms*). Despite being born into a toxic male-dominated environment, where her subjectivity has been severed, exposure to female subcultural groups fosters resilience and a sense of self in Girlo. Culturally, she feels devalued as a human being, as she is objectified both directly and indirectly, publicly, and privately — viewed as a second-class citizen. However, the seeds of a sound mind and strong character are planted within the matriarchal heterotopic spaces of the Rock's Matriarch and Ruby's Gentleman's Retreat.

The work of radical feminists Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (1988) is primarily concerned with women's objectification, ideas of sexual consent, and ownership, especially as women have been historically viewed as trafficked possessions with rape and sexual abuse as direct consequences of the patriarchy. Dworkin views pornography as a form of Hate Speech against women, as much pornography relies on the denigration and mutilation

of women. Influenced by Immanuel Kant's conception of objectification, they argue that "due to men's consumption of pornography, women as a group are reduced to the status of mere tools for men's purposes."³⁴ By the age of seven, Girlo has been denied her subjectivity and objectified as a sexual tool, and she has witnessed her mother's denial of autonomy via inertness as well as been prepared for a *reduction to body* and *reduction to appearance* then *silenced*³⁵ – all of which essentially deems her a victim of epistemic hermeneutical injustice. Philosopher Miranda Fricker (2015) coined the term *epistemic hermeneutical injustice*,³⁶ which refers to how certain groups or individuals within society are ignored by mainstream society, and their standpoints, lived experiences or knowledge are not considered within or as part of the knowledge pool. In disregarding these voices, the groups or individuals are made powerless to the ontological position of the dominant classes. Fricker advocates epistemic contribution as a basic right of human agency, pointing to "epistemic contribution as the active value protected in freedom of speech" (2015 p. 87) and as a "capability of special egalitarian concern" (*ibid*). In recent years, various sex abuse scandals involving powerful cultural icons from the 1980s have come to light, with their victims being consigned to a life of mental health and relationship problems and subject to epistemic hermeneutical injustice. Offenders range from Royal Family affiliates such as Jeffery Epstein to Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein to British Politician Lord Janner (whose victims' statements were not considered an epistemic contribution to their case and deemed unworthy by police), as well as a backlog of Roman Catholic Priests and cultural icons, including Rolf Harris, Gary Glitter and Jimmy Savile. Ironically his popular children's television programme, *Jim'll Fix It* features in within the narrative, when Girlo dreams of appearing on his show so she can escape the abuse she's

³⁴ Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, *Objectification*.

³⁵ From childhood, Girlo's body has become an instrument of sexual dominance, and her agency removed when she is not believed by the structures whom she'd been taught to trust: the immediate family, school, and media, who all collude to keep her suffering in silence.

receiving at home. Girlo's hope for the future demonstrates the power of men and how its dominance even takes ownership of her dreams. In addition to the structures of society colluding to oppress and silence Girlo, Susan Brownmiller (1972) highlights that "routine occurrence of child molestation remains a subject from which people prefer to avert their eyes" (1975, p. 272) and that it is the children and mothers who are blamed, while the offenders are ultimately protected. For Girlo to speak up when sexual abuse was not a political priority³⁷ is in itself an act of subjective agency; an act of empowerment and political rebellion. However, Nussbaum has challenged the idea that objectification is a negative phenomenon, arguing that maybe there are some types of positive objectification, which can be valuable or enjoyable.³⁸ For example, within pornography or prostitution, if an individual is photogenic or good at sex, why shouldn't they make money from it? In *Concrete Diamonds*, Ruby regains some subjective agency because despite being abused and objectified in childhood, she increases her power by establishing a business as an adult. By becoming the Madame of her enterprise rather than the girl of a pimp, Ruby empowers herself and gains a level of subjective agency. In addition, female empowerment characterised by the female solidarity displayed at the female-run retreat ironically removes many features of objectification. Within the brothel's heterotopic space, Ruby's girls objectify male clients as "floppy rubber butt plugs" or "tiddlers," rather than succumbing to notions of victimhood and sexual objectification found outside of the brothel. In this sense, the retreat becomes a sanctuary or a place of empowerment for women, with a role reversal where male clients are objectified tools of manipulation. Outside of Ruby's Retreat, Girlo's experiences of objectification as working-class and as a woman have been extended throughout her adolescence and into adult life where she becomes what Germaine

³⁷ ... and still isn't a priority with Boris Johnson believing that investigating non-recent child abuse cases as "spaffing money up the wall" despite police experiencing an "epidemic" of historic child abuse allegations against a whole host of offenders including teachers, care workers, coaches and other people who are responsible for children. *The Guardian*, Feb 2020.

³⁸ (*ibid.*)

Greer refers to as a *Manmade Woman* (2007): via a manufactured consent³⁹, where her body, voice and *being* is commodified and shaped to comply with the demands of men. It is not a woman's role to submit to the objectification imposed by patriarchy, but *what choice does she have? Where is her subjectivity? Where is her ability to transcend?* Even though her voice has been silenced, her body exploited, and her identity warped, it is through self-evaluation, self-definition from a working-class perspective, writing for those who are unheard that the character of Girlo resists patriarchal oppression and transcends the Master-slave dialectic.

During the decade Girlo was born, the 1980s saw a proliferation of post-feminist and revisionist feminist theory, which introduced a new focus in the dissection of oppression and subjugation of women, specifically looking at the lives of working-class women. Gilmore (1994) highlights that traditionally the genre of life-writing or autobiography has been reserved for the lives of *some* female writers who have been “pragmatically placed outside the genre ... always somehow ‘found’ on the margins of a constructed ‘place’ quite literally without history” (Gilmore, 1994). Life-writing, which generalises the idea of the female *self*, “claiming that women represent the self by representing others,”⁴⁰ is skewed because this represented *self* is predominantly the domain for those who are privileged and “have sought identity in [romantic] relationships rather than autonomy.”⁴¹ McRobbie (2004) advocates that feminism has been commodified, which has been embodied in female fictional characters such as Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw, who display female liberation but who are, in fact, still in search of the perfect man to find a sense of self-worth and completion (McRobbie, 2004).

Born of Black Feminism (founded on the principles of Marxism and social activism), intersectional feminism examines the multiple, cross-cultural barriers women face and

³⁹ Gramsci (1971) refers a “manufacture of consent” which disseminated via a nexus of propagandistic communication channels forms an omnipotent platform of unchallenged common sense.

⁴⁰ Cited in the introduction of (Gilmore, L., 1994).

⁴¹ (*ibid*).

criticises the first and second waves of feminism as pandering to a white middle-class agenda, which, primarily concerned with female identity and equality, did not sufficiently explore the intersections of race, class, and gender. The initial concept of intersectional theory originated as a revisionist feminist theory when, during the late 60s and early 70s, alongside the multiracial feminist movement, it germinated within sociological circles as a critique of the radical feminism of the 1960s. Social critic, bell hooks (1984) advocates that revisionist feminist theory rejects the idea that gender is the only factor in female oppression and that, within what she refers to as the White Supremacist Patriarchy, individuals are socialised to think in terms of competition instead of cooperation. There is an assumption that if someone is anti-racist,⁴² then this is their only political standpoint; however, hooks called for the examination of the complexities of these intersections between race, class, and gender to obtain a better understanding of what feminism *really* is (Bhattacharya, 2017). However, to dissect such complexities, it is imperative to grasp the social epistemology surrounding intersectional feminism. Intersectional feminism was essentially born of black feminist thought, which represents the standpoint of Black Women of the African Diaspora. As black women have been traditionally excluded from the production of knowledge (epistemology) and positions of power, black feminism places black women in a unique position where they inhabit the intersectional processes of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation, which ultimately shape a black woman's individual and collective consciousness, self-definition, behaviour, and actions (Few, 2007). Margot Lee Shetterly's (2016) novel, *Hidden Figures*, illustrates the intersecting inequalities that impacted the lives of three African-American female mathematicians in 1960's America, where class, race and gender oppression all colluded to disadvantage the women.⁴³ Recent British drama, *I May Destroy You*, written by

⁴² Anti-racism and feminism were viewed as separate entities, competing for the limelight.

⁴³ When the character of Katherine is assigned to calculate trajectories, she is expected to comply with behaviours of her superior white colleagues and wear a string of pearls to upkeep the 'respectable' image of the 1960's working woman. Katherine declares that as a woman of colour on the salary she receives that she cannot afford a string of pearls. She challenges

Michaela Coal (2020), gives a nuanced representation of female trauma, highlighting the intersectionality of class, race and gender within the context of a White Supremacist Patriarchy. The central character, Arabella, is an author who writes about her experiences of drug rape within the context of her struggle for personal intersectional identity. Her powerful monologue about forgetting the struggles of being a woman because she was “too busy being Black and poor” is a testament to the multiplicity of her presence at intersections.

Similarly, the novel *Keisha the Sket* (2021) by Jade L.B explores the life of a sexually expressive teenager growing up in London in the early 2000s. Keisha is a Sket, which is short for Jamaican slang: Sketal (promiscuous girl). However, Keisha, like Girlo, has agency, and, within the neoliberal hedonistic culture of the 2000s, she chooses to be promiscuous. Even though it is a coming-of-age tale, Keisha, like Girlo, builds a lot of bravado into her victimhood. In an interview with BBC Radio 4’s *Women’s Hour*, L.B speaks of her life experience, which inspired the story. She tells of how the label *sket* became “internalised within a local sense, in terms of her peers” and that she “didn’t want to entangle herself with the label sket” as she was “afraid that she’d be labelled as a *sket* if she wrote the book, which was unfair because boys could be as sexually free as they wanted to be.” She felt stifled to express herself. That said, her experiences gave her “license to express in a raw way.” The book also relates to themes of single parenthood and working-class culture, where girls were expected to grow up quickly, exposed to *adultification*, mothering their siblings or their incapacitated parents at an early age. Similarly, to *Keisha the Sket*, *Concrete Diamonds* is semi-autobiographical. Still, as the subject matter could be viewed as contentious, with themes relating to female sexuality, promiscuity,

her male white superior, highlighting the cumbersome restrictions placed on her as a black woman, such as having to walk further than her white colleagues to use a segregated bathroom — which puts her at a disadvantage with her timekeeping. However, when she *proves* herself *worthy* of White Supremacist approval due to her ground-breaking contribution to the space race, she is gifted a string of pearls by a white female colleague — a symbol that she has been accepted by the White Supremacist patriarch. The character of Mary petitions a judge to attend evening classes at an all-white high school to study Engineering. In her speech she makes comparisons with her journey and the Judges’ and points out how he was the first in some of his achievements. Mary then declares that she wishes to be the first African American student at the high school, and indeed the first African American female engineer at NASA. It is here where Mary claims her identity and defines *self*.

rape, and sexual abuse, I initially wanted to distance myself from any labels. I, therefore, wrote in the third person. Doing so provided a distance between the author and subject matter and allowed for a greater scope when exploring the historical significance of the *other* characters.

3.2. Subject Matter

“The critical dilemmas of the individual’s life ... are not solved by intellectual exploration of the facts nor the laws of thinking about them. Their resolutions emerge through conflicts and tumults in the soul, anxieties, agonies, perilous adventures of faith into unknown territories... ‘Truth,’ said Kierkegaard, is ‘subjectivity.’”

Jean-Paul Sartre (1946/2007, p. 3)

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Neo-Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1971) held that working-class people have their own culture; they have their *organic intellectuals* who can become free of the “false consciousness”⁴⁴ maintained by the via four pillars⁴⁵ of bourgeois hegemonic domination (Gramsci, 1971). As Gramsci’s pillars are intrinsically linked, interrelated at spontaneous interchangeable places, this literature review will examine the role of working-class people within the context of culture. It will include both high-brow and popular cultural references. Along with law, politics, and education, hegemonic limitations still exist within cultural institutions, preventing the epistemic legitimisation and professionalism of working-class people and their cultural values within the mainstream. Such restrictions, rooted in imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchal oppression, impose barriers, with gatekeepers blind-

⁴⁴ Gramsci, A., cited in Haralambos & Holborn, (2008 p. 538).

⁴⁵ Four pillars include: Education, Law, Mass Media, and Politics. Cited in Gramsci, A, (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, New York: International Publishers.

sighted by what Jean-Paul Sartre (1946/2007) refers to as “*mauvaise foi*” (2007, p16) or self-deception in their commitment to upholding Gramsci’s *false consciousness*. However, recent game-changing events such as the Global Pandemic, Black Lives Matter, Brexit, and the imminent threat of Climate Change, within the context of over a decade of Conservative-led austerity, have wobbled these pillars. Evaristo also highlights that the murder of George Floyd, and subsequent resurgence of BLM activism, has intensified criticism of widespread institutional racism, including within the publishing sector, which has “resulted in the industry being shaken to its core ... taking systematic racism seriously for the first time” (Evaristo, 2021 p. 176). Yet, despite this “real awakening” (Thompson, 1963 p. 376) which could be compared to that of the 1800’s humanitarian reformers, urgent social issues are reaching an ugly climax. It could be said that in today’s post-truth, woke culture,⁴⁶ the doors of hegemonic domination are being edged open, allowing the marginalised *other* to be heard by a much larger audience.

Historically, when we look at the representation of working-class people in culture, it routinely subscribes to a narrow range of identities, lazily relying on a limited range of personae. For example, in costume dramas, you will see roles that focus on servitude, poverty, and criminal underworlds. Social commentator, Rapper, and writer, Akala (2021), asks why there’s isn’t a greater representation of black working-class people in mainstream historical dramas, which overtly focuses on the *great and the good* figures of history. This viewpoint demonstrates how culture functions within Gramsci’s hegemony to overshadow the social realities of working-class life experiences: "The idea that there's this neutral way of presenting art that isn't from a particular class position or doesn't have a particular view of the world - I don't believe is true."⁴⁷ The *neutral way* Akala refers to is the ‘objectivity’ and fair representation cultural institutions claim to uphold. However, from a phenomenological

⁴⁶ “By the mid-20th century, *woke* had been extended figuratively to refer to being ‘aware’ or ‘well informed’ in a political or cultural sense. In the past decade, that meaning has been catapulted into mainstream use with a particular nuance of ‘alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice” OED, accessed 23/09/21.

⁴⁷ BBC Newsbeat interview with Akala.

perspective, if such institutions are made up of predominantly white, middle-class men, then it's inevitable that the material they produce will reflect their cultural values. Such values are historically built on imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchal foundations and have defined the building blocks of neoliberal capitalist ideology. As *Concrete Diamonds* and a body of critical theory suggests, the *common-sense* ideology of neoliberal capitalism is not inclusive of the actual lived experiences of working-class people, past or present.

"In terms of Dickensian inequality, in terms of the haves and have-nots, living cheek by jowl, London is really quite similar to what it was 200 years ago. I think lots of people will be shocked how much a teenager living in a slum then would have faced some similar challenges to kids living on a council estate today ... It's a deliberately cultivated ignorance, globally."

Akala (2021).

As Akala points out, "most of the period drama we get is usually focused on elites. Kings and queens and 'great men' — so to speak." Here, Akala links the oppressions intersecting class, race, and gender as working-class actors, dramas, and documentaries essentially erase, downplay, or rework the role of working-class lives and contributions to historical movements. Conversely, there have been some recent progressive developments with television programmes such as *Small Axe*, *It's a Sin*, *Virtues* and *The Help* and *The Outlaws*, providing authentic representations of working-class history and exploring the gaps between social ontology and historical realism; all of which have contributed to a broader cultural discourse. However, despite some progress made, middle and upper-class lives still take centre stage, with

the *massive* success of *The Crown* (2016) continuing the tradition of portraying British history through the lens of royalty and the aristocracy.

It is also interesting to point out that socialist filmmaker, Mike Leigh's film *Peterloo*, a heartrending yet politically stimulating portrayal of the Peterloo Massacre, possibly *the* defining event in the fight for universal suffrage, received a scarce promotion and some damning reviews. Ironically, this scant attention echoed the pitiful commemoration of the massacre itself, which initially was a small red plaque. I was surprised to find that most of my working-class friends hadn't heard of the Peterloo Massacre and remembered that it was not covered on the school syllabus. Leigh also points out that the Massacre wasn't covered on his syllabus either. Conversely, at *second-chance* or mature colleges⁴⁸ that catered for working-class students, where most of the students were Trade Unionists, such texts by Marxist historians Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson and E.J. Hobsbawm were taught as part of the curriculum. In the foreword of Jacqueline Riding's accompanying book, *Peterloo* (2019), Leigh says, "Peterloo is of seminal importance, yet many people have never heard of it, including curiously, generations of native Mancunians and Lancastrians" (2019, foreword). As an integral part of our history, the story couldn't be more relevant as "poverty, inequality, suppression of the press, indiscriminate surveillance and attacks on legitimate protest by brutal forces of regimes are all on the rise" (*ibid*). Through their work, Leigh's film and Riding's book have helped revive an interest in the historically disenfranchised working-classes, whose stories have been erased from the neoliberal rhetoric of the classroom. This revival can be demonstrated by establishing the *Peterloo Massacre Memorial Campaign* and installing a more appropriate memorial worthy of the hundreds of lives lost, the bodies maimed, and the families destroyed due to imperialist ineptitude and brutality. The campaign has had a significant impact

⁴⁸ Ruskin still exists in Oxford. New Battle Abby (Scottish) Northern College. & Harlech (Wales) – both of which were established in the 1920s but closed in 1990s. All provide an Oxbridge experience for working-class 'second-chance' students.

on local culture, with schools participating in the *Age of Revolution* project, where, amongst other initiatives, a graphic novel has been produced. This is an example of how Gramsci's pillars of Education and Media have colluded to mystify an integral part of working-class history. In addition, E.P. Thompson, who wrote extensively on the Industrial Revolution and post-war social history in his landmark work, *The Making of the English Working-classes* (1963), *Peterloo*, demystifies and gives an accurate the lives of women from the period; specifically, their activism outside of the home, as they are depicted as visibly walking alongside their men as political equals via the autonomous Manchester Female Reform Society.

Like existentialists, de Beauvoir and Sartre, and phenomenologists Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, Thompson understands class as a "historical phenomenon, unifying many disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness" (1968, p. 9), understanding class-consciousness as something that grows in the same way, but at different times and places. He avoids the term *structure* as he sees class as something that happens in relationships between real people within a "real context" (*ibid*) and deems the working-class as a descriptive term which "ties loosely together a bundle of discrete phenomena" (1968, p. 9), with class occurring as a "result of common experience" (*ibid*). Such experiences are either inherited or shared. The making of the working-classes is born of those who feel compelled to share their interests amongst themselves and in opposition to other men who have opposing interests. Historically, members of the working-classes did not have the means to share such experiences; however, with the rise in digital media platforms, organisations such as the *Peterloo Massacre Memorial Campaign* have a far greater reach, bringing the *real* history of universal suffrage to a global audience. Despite Thompson's lengthy and detailed portrayal of working-class people's life during the Industrial Revolution, not much is said for women's stories, specifically, their need to work and raise families simultaneously. Women in the Industrial Revolution were owned by their husbands, often

raped by their superiors, and had to work whilst pregnant alongside their young children in treacherous working conditions. In some cases, they also suffered domestic abuse, and single mothers' lives were still worse. The impact of disease due to cramped living conditions without adequate sewerage, in addition to malnutrition and child mortality rates, all had differing adverse effects on the lives of women. In addition to their domestic and maternal duties, *how did these women survive?* It is easy to forget that, unless one's genealogy is an aristocratic or royal bloodline, these women were our great-grandmothers and great-great-grandmothers. We all have our roots in working-class culture, and we *all* have an inherited trauma via our ancestral lineages.

As playwright Willy Russell (1986) illustrates in his play *Blood Brothers*, class is a social construct that relies on the Master-slave dialectic. This collective concept includes double oppression for working-class women. It has a triple impact on single mothers, who are just as ostracised in society today as they were during the Industrial Revolution. The central character Mrs Johnstone lives “on the never-never” (1986, p. 154), which refers to her borrowing to survive and metaphorically refers to her social standing. The barren Mrs Lyons, her affluent middle-class boss, takes her opportunity and convinces Mrs Johnstone that one of her twins would be better off with her. The play's central message is that, despite the twin boys coming from the same womb, the social environments in which they grow up determine their class and socio-economic attainment. The gaps between social ontology (characterised by *common sense* neoliberal capitalist ideals) and social realism are exacerbated, when owing to: “the shrinking of the pound, the global slump, and the price of oil” (1986, pg. 144) Mrs Lyons ruthlessly sacks Mrs Johnston (a hypocritical act in itself) even though she has many mouths to feed and there is no hope for a future in her community; illustrated by the milkman's bleakly deterministic sentiments, “next week never arrives around here. I'd be a rich man if next week ever came” (1986, p. 82), this replicates the social reality of working-class people today (thirty-eight years

after the play was written). Just like de Waal and Girlo, Russell writes from his life experiences, and he also felt his inadequacy when embarking on a writing career: “how could I,” he says, “... a piece of factory fodder, even change the course that my life was set upon?” (1986, p. 162). Unlike the Peterloo Massacre, *Blood Brothers* (1986) does appear on the curriculum, however as education is thought by many critical theorists as a means of preparing children for the workforce, it is often not taught within an historical context, thereby losing its socio-political significance. In his seminal work, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Neo-Marxist, and French Philosopher, Louis Althusser (1970/2014) asks the question: *how is it that a society that proclaims liberation and equality continues to impose multiple reproductions of domination and control?* He argues that the role of education is to persuade young people to accept their place within the capitalist system, describing the education system as crucial part of the Ideological State Apparatus,⁴⁹ which influences people to submit to the dominant narrative of neoliberal capitalism and accept the idea of role allocation. Education therefore transmits capitalist ideology in two main ways: schools do not encourage students to use critical thinking in relation to existing and historical society, and they teach capitalist norms and values as an accepted *common sense* — despite the associated inequalities. Neoliberal capitalism lurks on all areas of the education system, which is built upon individualized rigorous testing, which encourages competition from an early age. Sir Ken Robinson tracks the emergence of the neoliberal standardization of education, serving the requirements of industry, which treats children like *human capitals* (Gramsci, 1972), educating them in batches, with the school subscribing to mechanisms of social control such as the school bell (factory bell) and rigid timetabling. In addition, the rise of popular culture has bolstered Gramsci’s work, whereby corporate-driven popular culture

⁴⁹ Consists of institutions such as the church, political parties, unions, schools, mass media and the family.

serves to create passive consumption, or “mind balm,” as the character Nannie Pearl refers to it, surreptitiously promoting an individualized competitive worldview, whilst discouraging creative or critical thinking. Such devices work in association with other parts of the state apparatus to manufacture neoliberalist consent, disseminating the idea that the harder you work, the better job opportunities you’ll have. In *The Tyranny of Meritocracy*, Michael Sandel (2020) describes that those in *good jobs* believe that “their success is their own doing, the measure of their merit,” implying that those who are at the bottom of society deserve to be there because, as individuals, we are solely responsible for our destinies: if you don’t achieve success, then you are too stupid, too lazy, or not confident enough.

“Cultural history must be more than the sum of particular histories for it is with the relations between them, the particular forms of the whole organisation, that it is especially concerned. I would then define the theory of culture as the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life.”⁵⁰

Raymond Williams (1958)

Socialist cultural critic Raymond Williams has criticised the idea of binary oppositions. He spoke of both high-brow and popular culture, both with equal importance within the dialectic process. Traditionally *culture* has been defined by something exclusively for middle or upper-class people. In his 1958 essay, *Culture is Ordinary*, Williams questions the exclusionary nature of culture with elitist ideology dominating what is deemed worthy of cultural or educational consideration. There is a wealth of unheard voices waiting in the margins to contribute to the development of society. In *Culture & Society* (1963/2017), Williams attributes the culturally accepted negative traits of working-class people to the evolution of the masses,

⁵⁰ Williams, R., *The Analysis of Culture*, cited in Davies, R., (2018, p. 289).

which initially consisted of the *mob*. The masses or working classes have inherited negative features associated with mob mentality and have formed the basis of negative stereotyping of working-class people today. “The masses,” he says, “are other people” (1963/2017 p. 393), and he examines how our phenomenological interpretation of “the man on the street” (*ibid*) is a “collective image,” however “we know, all the time, our differences to him” (*ibid*). Such differences are only exacerbated by an individualized notion of identity, however as Williams states, “there are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses” (*ibid*). Even though working-class culture could be understood as an accumulation of life experiences, amassed over time and place, working-class people are often stereotyped as one body — one class — with each type of representation frequently seeing the social class in terms of binary oppositions, e.g., where one class is like this, the other is not. But the working-classes are not one body; they are not a “structure” nor “category” (1963, p. 11); they are a plethora of historical phenomena born of shared experiences, and, as such, those experiences should be that should be interpreted from the perspective of those who live it (Thompson, 1963). Sadly, in terms of contemporary visibility, working-class life is still portrayed as dysfunctional, dependent on the state and generally a social problem that needs to be solved by the professional, *helpful*, and virtuous middle class or the philanthropic *cultured* upper-class. The system, therefore, attempts to manage the “grievances” (*ibid* p. 11) of the working-class as the *less fortunate*, undermining their individual subjectivity and denying transcendence.

In comparison, representations of upper and middle-class people include lives that focus on power and control, whereby they have the *confidence* to impose their will upon the world. In contrast, working-class lives become the object of such power and control. From a critical perspective, working-class people whose cultural manufacture have been deemed uneducated, inarticulate, outdated, incompetent, and unqualified are ultimately victims of a state-imposed hate speech. Because their voices are essentially cancelled within mainstream society, this

would constitute epistemic hermetical injustice as *silencing* dumb working-class people, both literally and metaphorically. Within mainstream society, working-class knowledge, experience, and expertise are often deemed irrelevant, because according to hegemonic thought, working-class people are *in need*. As such, they are beneficiaries of assistance and advice, rendering them subjects of middle-class *discussion*. This, in effect, is part of broader cultural assimilation, which seeks to ghettoise, ostracise, and dehumanise working-class people, who are the Dickensian “undeserved poor” and “surplus to requirement in the Big Society” (see ‘Divide – Rule’ poem in *Concrete Diamonds*).

In addition, bestselling author of *My Name is Leon* (2016), Kit de Waal, also recognises a lack of working-class representation in culture, specifically in literature. In her Guardian article, she demands: *Make room for Working-class Authors* (2018). Like other authors from working-class backgrounds, she was never taught to believe that she was someone who could write books: “writing as a career? That never entered my head. The only writers I knew were dead. And apart from Enid Blyton, they were dead men. And white. And posh.” (2018) Like broadcasting, the publishing sector is a primarily upper middle class, London-centric industry, producing material to satisfy upper middle-class tastes, leaving working-class people almost invisible within the cultural canon. There is the assumption that art is a luxury, with *culture* defined by and catered for the middle and upper classes, then only those from better classes can write books professionally. People like Girlo are considered amateurs, who, unpaid for their art, are largely unacknowledged or are made to sanitise their work, to fit the commercial interests and cater for mainstream tastes. An example of this would be James Kelman’s stream-of-consciousness novel *How Late it Was, How Late* (1994) won the 1994 Booker Prize, and the judges were hesitant to award him the prize because it offended public taste. If we think in terms of cultural production, in particular the publishing industry, such representations of the middle and upper classes ring true. A 2016 paper published by Dr Dave O’Brien of Goldsmiths

(*The Guardian*, 2018) found that only 10% of those with parents in routine/manual labour were professional writers, whereas 47% of all authors, writers and translators came from professional, middle-class backgrounds. In a recent Bookseller survey of 1,167 people in the publishing industry, almost 80% who identify as working-class felt that their background had hindered their careers. In a practical sense, many didn't have the financial backing to help secure internships or embrace the "networking culture and progress through the industry."⁵¹ In addition, they were made to feel like imposters with phrases such as *outsider looking in* or *duck out of water* and *lacking cultural shorthand*,⁵² being bandied about in their presence. *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged* (2019) is one of the most comprehensive, detailed studies of social class in contemporary Britain. Using in-depth interviews with 175 participants with elite occupations from various backgrounds, Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison (2019) broke new ground within the field. In the introduction, Friedman & Laurison introduce the study with an analysis of an interview with high-profile media executive Mark; at the age of 39, he ascended rapidly to a considerable position of power within the upper echelons of the television industry. "Mark was legitimately meritorious in all the ways we conventionally think about 'merit' – he had achieved highly in the education system [Oxford University], he had worked hard, and he had amassed a wealth of valuable experience. Yet, as he explained, Mark had also been given a particular *platform* to demonstrate his 'merits', and a platform where his package of 'merits', and the way he had presented them, was readily recognised by senior figures" (*ibid* p. 5). Referring to a "following wind" (*ibid* p. 4) which, characterised by patronage, apprenticeship and access to 'the club', ensured Mark's success was quick, however, as Friedman & Laurison argues, this was not solely due to legitimate merit; he had been given certain privileged opportunities to succeed and possessed the cultural capital to do

⁵¹ 2019 Bookseller Survey.

⁵² (*Ibid*)

so. “This ability to *land* merit and how it is connected to a person’s background, is central to this book. Indeed, the themes that flanked Mark’s trajectory – the Bank of Mum and Dad, informal sponsorship, the luxury of fitting in – were echoed throughout our interviews. And as we argue in the chapters that follow, each play a critical role in erecting, and maintaining, the UK’s class ceiling,” (*ibid* p. 5). The section entitled, *The (premature) Death of Class*, identifies that during the 1980s and 90s, an influx of academics and politicians declared the end of the class system. As E.P. Thompson points out, the assumption that “any notion of class as a pejorative theoretical construct” (1963 p. 10), assumes that class doesn’t even exist. Tony Blair’s 1999 Labour Conference speech promoted the idea of meritocracy to achieve social mobility, proclaiming “a model 21st century nation, based not on privilege, class or background, but on the equal worth of all” (1999). New Labour’s *Third Way* ideologically rebranded “inequality as a myth” (2018, p. 8) as the rhetorical trope of *Fair Access* became “key in justifying inequality, imbuing inequality with what Goldthorpe calls *meritocratic legitimacy*” (*ibid*). Today, *meritocratic legitimacy* endorses cultural representations that cast working-class people in a dysfunctional light: dependent on the state and imbued with social problems, while the interests, actions, and activities of the middle and upper-class lives of business leaders, politicians, broadcasters, publishers, philanthropists etc. are the mirror-opposite: functional, productive, resourceful, and financially independent of state assistance. Social mobility is a product dependent on the helpfulness of the middle and upper classes, particularly in relation to less fortunate *objects* of such help. Blair’s policies, such as the New Deal, revitalised the idea of the deserved and under deserved poor, with the *undeserved* consigned to underclass sink estates, understood in popular cultural terms as Human Zoos depicted in Poverty Porn, where working-class people are mocked and/or pitied for their lack of socio-economic capital. Sociologists recognise disparities in social capital, whereby income inequality and poor health are linked. Sociologist Iain Wilkinson found that if there is greater

income inequality in a rich country, then social anxiety and stress will be much higher, resulting in a culture of inequality, where an “experience of lower social status or subordination” (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008 p. 303) is unfairly felt by the poorest.

Furthermore, class representation in Poverty Porn insists that middle upper-class lives be held up as aspirational *ideals*. If the *dumb* working-classes followed middle class advice and behaviour, their problems would be solved. Broadcasting has played a large part in disseminating such ideas, with television programmes like *Jeremy Kyle*, *Supernanny*, *You Are What You Eat?* *How Clean is your House?* *Don't Pay We'll Take it Away* or dramas such as *Two Pints of Lager* and *Shameless*; all of which serve to not only patronise their participants, shame and frighten their working-class viewers, but also to reinforce unfair stereotypes, thereby giving professionals the right to advise and assist with all matters; from child discipline and healthy eating to confidence-raising and how to find employment. But, if the *objects of help* didn't comply with what is essentially a component of cultural homogenisation, they'd be judged furthermore and demonised as the undeserving poor. de Waal summarises this middle/upper class *benevolence* perfectly: “The notion of social mobility has always smacked of: “How can we help you to be more like us?” It seems to say that to be working-class is to be a failure.”

“Yeah but no, but!”

Vicky Pollard.

In mainstream culture, working-class identities are presented as full of vice. In contrast, middle class identities are driven by virtue, which they have ‘earned’ through perceived *meritocratic legitimacy*. This concept ignores that they have been given the luxury of a

platform with the benefits of a *following wind*. In addition, *The Class Ceiling* also found that attitudes towards those who could not *get in* nor *get on* within elite occupations simply came down to a matter of *confidence*. However, as the study goes on to find, it is a collection of norms and values, or cultural capital specific to the middle and upper classes, which allows some people access and not others, leaving working-class and marginalised people feeling like social outsiders or aliens within their fields of work. A whole host of thinkers have echoed the same sentiments of imposter syndrome found in the Bookseller Survey responses: scholars, activists, and writers such as Beverly Skeggs, bell hooks, Diane Reay, Kalvant Bhopal and Lynsey Hanley all outline the specifics of women and racial-ethnic minority groups on upward trajectories in their careers. Their experiences display a sense of dislocation, where they didn't fit the spaces, they chose to occupy, both past and present. Skeggs felt like a fraud amongst her academic colleagues, and her family perceived her as someone who "got above herself" (2018, p. 117). Girlo also suffers from imposter syndrome, which is highlighted when she meets poetry professor (The Lighthouse Bard), in his "incubator of greats." Her interior thoughts clearly reflect feelings of inadequacy: "who did she think she was, rocking up, thinking she could do a fucking MA?" She feels confronted by the patriarchy: "beards usually intimidated Girlo. A beard, in her mind, stood for authority and power – which in her experience – bred corruption and abuse." In this respect, a beard is an emotional trigger for Girlo. Still, in her internal monologue, a conflict between imminence and transcendence persists: "her heart was rebellious, but her mind was tortured with people pleasing." But, as her journey proceeds, she comes to understand that it is *because* of such conflicts and limitations that she finds a unique perspective that shapes her human agency and *becoming* an artist.

However, from an outsider-within perspective, people can find themselves in a unique position. Via their situated knowledge, they can highlight patterns of behaviour that those within the dominant position of privilege are unable to see (Allen, 1996). The idea of the

outsider-within refers to “a special standpoint encompassing the self, family, and society” (Collins, 1986 pg. 14). It relates to people's unique experiences as they move between *common sense*⁵³ and the *meritocratic legitimacy* of mainstream culture and their own cultures (Ritzer, 2007 pg. 207). When referring to situated knowledge, sociologist Dr. Lauren Griffin (2009) regards those from working-class communities to have a far richer experience of knowledge acquisition as they are subject to more struggles than those from the higher classes. Therefore, in relation to their “knowledge” and “patterns of thought” (2009, p. 447), those from the working-classes “experience more, and have a more complete and diverse knowledge of the world. This provides them with a better foundation for their worldview and their standpoint” (2009, p. 447). Standpoint theory has been used as a post-modern analysis method, specifically when dealing with inter-subjective discourses shaped by a person’s experiences and constructed via social groups, locations, and historical periods. Post-feminist thinkers Susan Mann and Lori Kelley understand the theoretical grounding for standpoint theory as distinctly unique; it “varies depending upon the social conditions under which it was produced” (1997 p. 392), which is characterised by the notion that such standpoints can help create more objective accounts of the world. The proletariat standpoint implies that working-class people are ideal knowers” (*ibid*) but can this only apply if they understand the class system within the context of the struggles and barriers met daily. Liberation seems impossible if working-class people are subject to what de Beauvoir refers to as imminence within Gramsci’s hegemonic pillars of manufactured consent. In Robert Tressell’s (1914) classic of working-class fiction, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, protagonist, Frank Owen accuses his fellow workmen of *Mugsborough* as consenting to their poverty by “accepting the present system, in the same way that they accepted the alternating seasons” (1914/2004 p. 247). He highlights how Christianity

⁵³ Common sense is unquestioned by mainstream society and is rooted in hegemony (ideology of the dominant class).

hypocritically promotes individualism and autocracy, rather than collectivism and autonomy, and refers to Hegel's Life-death struggle.

“As long as this “Battle of Life” system endures, we have the right to blame other people for doing the same things that we ourselves compelled to do. Blame the system. But that is just what the hands did not do. They blame each other.... but with the Great System of which they were all more or less the victims they were quite content, being persuaded that it was the only one possible and the best that human wisdom could devise.”

Robert Tressell (1914, p. 246-247).

Considering that the reality of working-class lives has been underrepresented by the mainstream, invisible historically and in contemporary life, how can we achieve a more rounded, nuanced understanding of social class? How can we encourage a collective transcendence so that working-class people can cultivate, create, and share their stories so that we *all* feel validated within society? In an interview with Richard Burton *On his Humble Welsh Upbringing*, he refers to miners as skilled workers who saw themselves as the “aristocrats of the labouring classes.” He speaks of miners as *The Kings of the Underworld, The Lords of the Coalface*, who’d “glare at posh people on the road.” However, as a neoliberal capitalist ideology has taken hold, the image of the noble working-class has been relegated as a sub-group within society, with women falling far below them. The Proletariat has become the Under-class to incorporate Lad culture and Ladette culture, with the newest categorical insult of Chavs and Chavettes. As a result, much working-class representation focuses on qualities imposed by their geographical and economic status, such as lack of initiative or motivation and aggression or unintelligence. Such methods of demonisation can be linked to those explored in *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000), where bell hooks’ coins the term ghettoization to describe the American government’s gentrification practices and solution to rid white America

of ‘crime,’ i.e., working-class black people. The process of ghettoization has also happened here in the U.K. with post-industrialisation, gentrification and property tycoons hoovering up houses as second-homes or holiday lets, leading to working-class people being ghettoized in *sink estates* or *ghost towns*. However, the portrayal of working-class women broadens to include a spectrum of socially problematic behaviours which involve crime, unemployment, welfare dependency, sexual promiscuity, divorce, and single parenthood. All of which are prevalent themes explored in *Concrete Diamonds*.

*“The reason Vicky Pollard caught the public imagination is that she embodies with such fearful accuracy of several of the great scourges of contemporary Britain: aggressive all-female gangs of embittered, hormonal, drunken teenagers; gym slip mums who choose to get pregnant as a career option; pasty-faced, lard-gutted slappers who’ll drop their knickers in the blink of an eye . . . these people do exist and are every bit as ripe and just a target for social satire as were, say, the raddled working-class drunks sent up by Hogarth in *Gin Lane*.”⁵⁴*

James Delingpole (2006, p. 25).

In *Chav Mum Chav Scum: Class Disgust in Contemporary Britain*, Imogen Tyler (2008) explores the new vocabulary used to ridicule working-class people and concentrates specifically on cultural representations of the female ‘chav,’ which essentially vilifies young working-class mothers. She draws on cultural stereotypes depicted by characters such as Vicky Pollard. Also, Tyler refers to the online abuse of white working-class people, which demonstrates the power of such negative stereotyping. Like, Friedman & Laurison Tyler (2020), Imogen Tyler discusses how the notion of social class disappeared from critical

⁵⁴ Cited in *Chav Mum Chav Scum: Class Disgust in Contemporary Britain*, Tyler, I., (Routledge, 2008).

analysis from the 1980s onwards, at the same time as economic polarisation became engrained within British culture. Tyler draws on the work of Beverly Skeggs (2005), who suggests the eradication of class as “an analytic category [that] occurs alongside the rise of political rhetoric of inclusion, classlessness, and social mobility, whilst terms such as ‘social exclusion’ and ‘the underclass’ rapidly took the place of terms such as ‘working-class’” (*ibid*) – a term that has been “emptied of meaning” (2008, p. 20) within academic discourse, especially relating to the research of class inequality. She states that Sayer (2002) refers to this as “paranoid” with researchers feeling too embarrassed or ashamed, and academics from working-class backgrounds (organic intellectuals) experiencing their “own class origins as a dirty secret” (*ibid*). That said, within an era defined by identity politics, it is essential to point out that such harmful and derogatory representations of any other social group would be considered a hate crime in any other situation.

3.3. Stylistic Inspiration

“Poverty and oppression encourage you to dream, but they also deny you the chance to realize those fantasies other than in jokes, art or anecdotes.”

Eagleton, T. (2005, p. 286).

Concrete Diamonds is primarily concerned with the development of the protagonist, Girlo, as an artist so perhaps the work could be characterised as a *Künstlerroman*. The *Künstlerroman* or *artist’s novel* originates from the 18th Century Germanic Romantic tradition as part of a wave of rebellious writers. A subgenre of the more recognised *Bildungsroman*, which could be described as a coming-of-age tale, the *Künstlerroman* focuses on the

protagonist's "state of confinement in childhood,"⁵⁵ then follows her through a difficult journey, influenced by a number of "counteracting forces — one that nurtures the artistic career, and one that acts as an obstacle to [her] inevitable triumph."⁵⁶ Through this journey of becoming, the protagonist strives to know what Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe describes as a desire to know her "own internal cravings and emotions" (Fondo, 2013, p. 27). He understands "writing as a means of personal contemplation," (*ibid*) and his novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-6) sets the standard for both the *Künstlerroman* and the *Bildungsroman*; both of which focus on the growth and development of the protagonist. As critical theorist, Blossom Fondo points out that "the female artist is caught between inner creativity and social expectations; whereby she has to attain artistic success at a higher personal cost than her male counterpart" (*ibid*, p. 29) because women were not afforded the same rights to participate in public life, and that "womanhood was a vocation in itself" (*ibid* p. 28).

Drawing on sociological influences grounded in critical theory, *Concrete Diamonds* places the subject in place, time and environment. In her analysis of Paule Marshall's Postcolonial *Künstlerroman*, *Triangular Road: A Memoir*⁵⁷ (2009), Blossom Fondo attributes three parts to the genre; namely for the subject to be explored in a particular time, place, and environment, to trace the collective action, struggle, and trauma of shared experiences via the protagonist's apprenticeship or a journey. As artistic developmental novels by women are largely misrepresented as *Bildungsroman*, this has prevented the female artist from acquiring the label of *artist*, hindering her progression from amateur to professional as Fondo points out, "the *Künstlerroman* was initially the exclusive domain of males" (2013, p. 28). It is interesting to point out that James Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist* (1916/1991) is described as a

⁵⁵ Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms.

⁵⁶ (*ibid*).

⁵⁷ Described as a coming-of-age tale: "Paule Marshall offers an indelible portrait of a young black woman coming of age as a novelist in a literary world dominated by white men," (Amazon summary).

Künstlerroman. Social critic, Terry Eagleton describes Stephen (fictionalised version of Joyce): “as a prisoner of his senses, unable to exert control over his environment. He fumbles for the relations between words, the senses, and the spirit” (2005, p. 302). True to the Künstlerroman form, Marshall, Girlo and Stephen share a sense of alienation, however, within the context of Collins’ *Matrix of Domination* (2006), perhaps the women’s journey is more precarious than that of Stephen’s. Within the literary canon, the Künstlerroman is an underrated genre, especially from the perspective of marginalised artists, however, the rise of the female artist-hero throughout the first wave of feminism and New Woman of the 1900s coincided and the female Bildungsroman became popular. But, despite women making inroads in literature, the plot typically ended in marriage e.g., Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847/1999) finds its conclusion in marriage and subsequent elevation of social status — with the detail of the protagonist as a practising artist a mere footnote in her overall development. In *I am an artist, sir. And a Woman*, (2013) Elise Thornton highlights the intersection of modernism, creativity, and gender within the works of Virginia Woolf, specifically *A Room of One’s Own* (1929/2000) focusing on “women’s autonomy, education, professionalisation, and their right to individual self-expression as artists,” (2013 p. 2) when women sought to define their independence via their environment in order to fulfil their artistic autonomy. However, as literary pursuits and feminist action was reserved for bourgeoisie women, black and working-class women were excluded. Historically, working-class women’s poetry has been marginalised and overlooked by commercial publishers. In 2008, social historian, Florence Boos recovered a mass of underrated poetry written by 19th-century working-class women “who often made their points with clarity and force” (2008 p. 17). She comments that, sadly, most of the work she recovered was left incomplete, unpublished or in some cases, destroyed as “most mainstream editors and reviewers ignored their contributions, and class-based condescension and malign neglect silenced their poetic efforts” (2008 p. 15). Boos describes how working-class poets have a

distinctive style which doesn't subscribe to superfluous stylistic forms, "avoiding both, by necessity, and intention the framework of classical and historical literary forms whose projections and variations provide much of the nuanced intelligence in elite poetry" (2008 p. 17). British female factory workers had "little or no hope of earning a living from their pens" (*ibid*), and in *A Thousand Time's I'd Rather be a Factory Girl*, by Elizabeth Duncan, illustrating a defiance to overcome. *She's Coming Ye Bards*, reveals her escape from "the factory so dreary and dismal," (*ibid*) as she sought "success in her unfinished book" (*ibid*) expressing that if published, her book will aid in her liberation "from the incessant toils of a factory life." (2008, p. 203).

In *Portrait of an Artist*, the green rose metaphor represents Stephen's becoming as an artist and Irish independence. In *Concrete Diamonds*, the symbolism lies in the use of diamonds or precious stones, which represent the female characters in the principal narrative, and is a representation of the repercussions of industrialism from an eco-feminist perspective. Within the recent climate crisis debate, the once rational ideology of capitalism's infinite growth has come under scrutiny as our resources are finite within a fragile environment. *Concrete Diamonds*, attempts to link the exploitative nature of capitalism, including the societal, economic, and ecological impact of colonialism and industrialism. In addition, the diamond is multi-faceted, thereby reflecting a myriad of perspectives, and as a piece of coal that endures, only to emerge after thousands of years of pressure, the diamond could be considered a form of collective transcendence.⁵⁸ In addition, a key feature of *Concrete Diamonds* is the phallic concrete poetry which marks the developmental process of Girlo as she moves through significant periods of social change. However, as her art does not comply with the requirements of bourgeoisie tastes, she takes to the streets.

⁵⁸ Final diamond shaped poem, *Wild Women* could be considered Girlo's culminative radical praxis.

4. Conclusion

“No book is genuinely free from political bias ... And the more one is conscious of one’s political bias, the more chance one has of acting politically without sacrificing one’s aesthetic and intellectual integrity.”

George Orwell (1946/2004 p. 8).

As a cultural critic and social activist my worldview has grown alongside developments in critical theory. In this sense, all the poems, short stories, plays, micro-fictions, songs and essays I have written have been forms of radical praxis ... they are the organic expressions of the “somethings and nothings, snapshots of being, and confetti words from so many mouths-and-hands-and-brains [that] finally came together ... where connections were made, and theories came into being.”⁵⁹

However, as I was raised in a ‘subcultural’ environment, when I first entered higher education, the mainstream culture of university was utterly alien to me. The academic language of Political Science was baffling — and every time I picked up a book from the prescribed reading list, I’d find myself reaching for the *Oxford Politics Dictionary*; becoming lost in a quagmire of words and concepts too big and too important for the ‘likes of us.’ Then, I discovered George Orwell. He not only interpreted politics with passion, integrity, clarity, and truth, he transformed those mighty concepts into something accessible — something that people like *us* needed to know. I saw him as a ‘method’ writer, as he submerged himself into the worlds he wrote about, *becoming* the subject matter. And when I learned that he died of tuberculosis after living *Down & Out in Paris & London* (1933/2001), I had so much respect

⁵⁹ *Concrete Diamonds* pg.91.

for him. In his transformative essay, *Why I Write* (1946/2004), he identifies four motives⁶⁰ for why writers write. During my artistic and academic journey, I have touched upon them all. However, it is the final motive that has remained steadfast.

“4. Political purpose — using the word ‘political’ in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people’s idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.”

Orwell. G. (1946/2004 p. 5).

Throughout my writing career, I have been discouraged from political writing, because “art should have nothing to do with politics” (*ibid* pg. 5), which Orwell quite rightly points out ... “is itself a political attitude” (*ibid*). Where some have been frightened, others have championed and encouraged my work, and if it wasn’t for Nigel Jenkins, I wouldn’t be writing this conclusion right now. He gave me the opportunity to write on the MA Creative Writing programme and introduced me to socialist giants in Welsh literature, such as Idris Davies and Raymond Williams.⁶¹ In terms of conveying a political message, the best piece of advice Nigel gave was, *rather than using a sledgehammer, use a surgeon’s blade*. This delicate approach has always been challenging because I’ve always felt that I have no time for fancy, superfluous language — I have always had a message to convey with immediate effect. Even after the age of thirty, when most “abandon individual ambition ... and live chiefly for others or are simply smothered under drudgery” (*ibid* pg. 5), I am still trying to convey that message. Thankfully, in a volatile 21st Century, writing gives me — a working-class single mother from the valleys

⁶⁰ Orwell identifies four motives for writing, these include: 1. Sheer Egotism. 2. Aesthetic Enthusiasm. 3. Historical impulse 4. Political Purpose. See Orwell, G, *Why I Write*, (1946/2004 pg. 4-5) Penguin Books, ‘Great Ideas’ (2004).

⁶¹ He also exposed me to the works of contemporary fiction writers found in *Urban Welsh Fiction*, such as Jon Gower, Niall Griffiths, Rachel Trezise and lloyd robson, whose social realities were more akin to my own.

— the motivation to do so.

Over the last fourteen years, whilst trying to hone my craft, Nigel’s advice has lingered. I’m not sure whether I have *fully* taken it on board. It is up to the reader to decide because, after all, art is subjective. Literature, like history, is an ongoing discourse; a philosophy that Merleau-Ponty says “is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth but like art [it is] the act of bringing truth into being” (1962/1999 p. xx). When writing *Concrete Diamonds*, I knew that the work might be classified as an auto-fictional exploration of identity. However, from conception, I have always considered it an emancipatory project. The characters were inherently familiar for some, whereas others found the subject matter contentious and risqué. In a post-truth era, identity has become synonymous with political action. It has come to define the organisation of social movements which question the origin and futures of violence, exploitation, and marginalisation of the powerless. Seeking common ground within the intersections of working-class and marginalised identities couldn’t be more pressing at this time. It could be argued that, against the backdrop of years of austerity under a punitive Conservative government, political disenfranchisement (leading to a rise in nationalism and Brexit) *and* a global pandemic, that we are in a state of a national identity crisis; experiencing increased instability in an era defined by culture wars. Many social commentators agree that that neoliberal capitalist ideology is no longer serving our society, as we see the effects of outdated imperialist and patriarchal power structures and endemic social inequality permeate every aspect of our culture.

“Perception is not simply another fact noted in the world because it is the very situation that cannot be explained or filled in providing a full picture of the world.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962/1999 p. 207).

If hermeneutics is “the business of interpretation” (Heidegger, 2004, p. 7), and phenomenology shapes our understanding of knowledge (epistemology), then it could be said that art is knowledge and qualia (perceived experiences) are interpreted via literature. In this sense we become the text, and as a contribution to social ontology, *Concrete Diamonds* reveals the socio-political and cultural context of classism today, whilst exploring current issues of feminism in a broader historical context. And as there is no distinction between epistemology and ontology (it is a continual process of phenomenological inquiry), *Concrete Diamonds* could be considered as valid as a scientific experiment. The progression or *becoming* of Girlo comes in the form of political writing, ultimately defining the process of emancipation as something that is not a passive but an active role. Her inherited, collective working-class and feminist values, coupled with her ‘ladette’ behaviour, allow her to escape passive imminence, enabling her to adopt the subjective qualities associated with ‘masculine’ transcendence.⁶² Using the act of storytelling as an emancipatory vehicle, she embarks on a quest for collective liberation, and using analepsis and prolepsis, not only builds suspense and mystery, but also connects the individual stories of the women. Their predicaments mirror one another’s as the years unfold; serving to highlight their collective struggles and illustrates the fact that the lives of working-class women have not much changed at all. They are the products of two histories: cultural and personal, which have become intertwined. Within the cultural domain, the symbol of the doll,⁶³ for example, is lifeless and robotic, ultimately foreshadowing what a little girl will become in adulthood: a pretty, passive, voiceless object.

As *Concrete Diamonds* draws upon the lives of many characters who have been disenfranchised by mainstream society, it could be said that it is a work of egalitarian concern,

⁶² Her access to the public sphere has been encouraged by her politically active family, continuing the tradition of grass-roots activism and a striving for revolution.

⁶³ Girlo’s poem, *I AM DOLL* recognises how her identity has been overshadowed by a rag doll. A possession owned by society. Which compared to her best friend’s china doll, has obvious lower-status connotations. It is here that she internalises both the culturally imposed symbol of the doll, and class disparities regarding materialism.

as Audre Lorde states: “poetry is the way we give name to the nameless,” (1984, p. 26). American poet, Adrienne Rich envisions poetry as *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978/1993) which explores new relationships with consciousness and nature. In terms of consciousness, perhaps the interconnected nature of the characters’ relationships could be defined by the progression from a fertile land to the hostile post-industrial landscape.⁶⁴ In *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Lorde speaks of poetry as illumination in her chapter, *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, it is “a vital necessity of our existence” (1984, p. 26). She states that “the farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (*ibid*). Like Pinkola Estés, Lorde takes a psychoanalytical approach, where she states that “for each of us women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing, our true spirit rises” (*ibid* p. 25) ... it is here⁶⁵ where consciousness is formed; not in the restrictive, phallic-centric world, where “within living structures defined by profit, by linear-power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive” (1984, p. 28). Pinkola Estés uses the metaphor of a gilded cage or carriage to describe the many traps of patriarchy, claiming that repressed states of being create “a devalued life” (1992, p. 223). She urges all women to cast off the illusions of the “gilded carriage” (*ibid*) in favour of a life authentically lived, beyond the shackles of ideological constraints. Lorde directly addresses: “the white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black Mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: ‘I feel, therefore I can be free,’” (Lorde, A. 1984, p. 27). Such deep psyche connections to poetry are fundamental to transcendence and Lorde speaks of poetry as a form of distillation, “not the sterile wordplay that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean – to covert a desperate wish for imagination without insight” (*ibid* p. 26).

⁶⁴ In the 1980s Lorde, A., created an alternate world to racist America in *The Black Unicorn* (1981).

⁶⁵ “Beautiful/and tough as chestnut/stanchions against (y) our nightmare of weakness/ and of impotence,” Lorde, A., *Black Mother Woman from a Land Where Other People Live*, (Broadside Press; 1973) cited in *Sister Other*, (1984/2007 p. 25)

Within *Concrete Diamonds*, there is a constant reminder that women are economically weaker than men. The society in which Girlo grows up is defined by the needs and actions of men, who make the rules, write the books, set the agenda, and control discourse. However, within these constraints, Girlo makes it her mission to take ownership of her past, present and future, dismantling the mechanisms of oppression with critical thinking and independent learning.⁶⁶ She understands that emancipation takes collective action and an imposing of will upon the world, and her stylistic inspiration does not come from the works of ‘Great Men,’ but from her sacred fount ... from the subterranean murmurs of her sister soul. Through her observation and distillation of lived experiences, within the dialectic process she can free herself and *others* from the chains of patriarchal power and capitalism. It is through the act of writing that she becomes neither master nor slave but an autonomous being in a constant state of transcendence.

⁶⁶ Fundamental Habits of Learning.

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