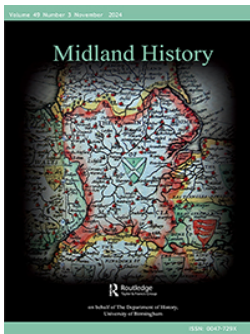


Wave goodbye to the future: Haunting, music, and cultural stasis in the regional novels of Catherine O’Flynn and Joel Lane

Item Type	Journal article
Authors	Francis, Robert;McDonald, Paul
Citation	Francis, R. and McDonald, P. (2024) Wave goodbye to the future: Haunting, music, and cultural stasis in the regional novels of Catherine O’Flynn and Joel Lane. <i>Midland History</i> , 49(3), pp. 354-371.
DOI	10.1080/0047729x.2024.2428459
Publisher	Taylor & Francis
Journal	Midland History
Download date	2026-03-06 12:06:45
License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/2436/625805



Wave Goodbye to the Future: Haunting, Music, and Cultural Stasis in the Regional Novels of Catherine O'Flynn and Joel Lane

Rob Francis & Paul McDonald

To cite this article: Rob Francis & Paul McDonald (2024) Wave Goodbye to the Future: Haunting, Music, and Cultural Stasis in the Regional Novels of Catherine O'Flynn and Joel Lane, *Midland History*, 49:3, 354-371, DOI: [10.1080/0047729X.2024.2428459](https://doi.org/10.1080/0047729X.2024.2428459)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0047729X.2024.2428459>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 02 Dec 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 72



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Wave Goodbye to the Future: Haunting, Music, and Cultural Stasis in the Regional Novels of Catherine O'Flynn and Joel Lane

Rob Francis^a and Paul McDonald^b

^aFaculty of Arts, Business, and Social Sciences, University of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, UK;

^bIndependent Researcher



ABSTRACT

Using Mark Fisher's reconfigurations of Derrida's Hauntology, this article explores the interactions between these narrative features in the works of Catherine O'Flynn and Joel Lane. Fisher reworks hauntology in relation to the distinct features of 'futuristic' music and 'retro' perceptions of what lay ahead. He links this psychic and cultural trap with ideas of the weird and the eerie. Both O'Flynn and Lane have produced eerie texts set in the off-kilter and marginal West Midlands regions, placing their characters in literal and symbolic haunted sites. Their respective spectres – people, places and cultures – are caught in a perpetual liminality and psychic looping: a hauntological position. These play out through the motifs of melancholic landscapes, personalities and cultural currents, most notably in music. This article interrogates these strange conjugations and interfaces that play out in the fiction of O'Flynn and Lane.

KEYWORDS

Catherine O'Flynn; Joel Lane; music; hauntology; lost futures; capitalism

In this article, we are interested in how the themes of haunting and music signify in the debut novels of two West Midlands writers, Catherine O'Flynn and Joel Lane: *What Was Lost* (2007) by O'Flynn and *From Blue to Black* (2000) by Lane.¹ Both authors, writing in the early years of the twenty-first century, produced texts set in off-kilter and marginal West Midlands regions, placing their characters in symbolic haunted sites. Using Mark Fisher's reconfigurations of Derrida's hauntology, his concept of the eerie, and his reading of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century music culture, we explore connections between O'Flynn and Lane. In books such as *The Ghosts of My Life* (2014), Fisher reworked the concept of hauntology, exploring how popular modernist music has been eclipsed by a culture of appropriation and stagnation, a theme that, as we shall show, is central to the work of O'Flynn and Lane. Their characters are caught in melancholic landscapes and sites of psychic and cultural entrapment, haunted as much by a lost future, as they are by the past. We argue that they confirm the cultural

CONTACT Rob Francis  r.francis@wlv.ac.uk  Faculty of Arts, Business, and Social Sciences, University of Wolverhampton, Wulfruna Street, Wolverhampton WV1 1LY, UK

¹C. O'Flynn, *What Was Lost* (Birmingham: Tindal Street Press, 2007); J. Lane, *From Blue to Black* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2000).

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

stasis that Fisher observed at a time when, in his view, the conditions for creativity were dismantled by the consequences of neoliberalism.

Fisher's Hauntology takes its lead from Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994). It is a portmanteau word derived from Haunting and Ontology. Derrida makes the case that the West is haunted by the failed attempts of communist utopias and, borrowing from Francis Fukuyama's *End of History*,² that we find ourselves in a social situation where nothing new can be produced without direct reference to 'always already' existing systems of signs – linguistic, historical and cultural – that inform the present. About the wake of communism and the rise of Thatcherite policy and Reganomics, he says:

There is today in the world a dominant discourse [...] This dominating discourse often has the manic, jubilatory, and incantatory form that Freud assigned to the so-called triumphant phase of mourning work. The incantation repeats and ritualizes itself, it holds forth and holds to formulas, like any animistic magic. To the rhythm of a cadenced march, it proclaims: Marx is dead, communism is dead, very dead, and along with it its hopes, its discourse, its theories, and its practices. It says: long live capitalism, long live the market, here's to the survival of economic and political liberalism!³

According to Derrida fresh perspectives of governance and culture are lost, but there is never total loss; 'haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony'.⁴ The loss itself is proof, somewhat, of its reality – like a phantom, it becomes a present-absence, and this can be levelled at personal losses as much as political or social ones. Take, for example, the relics of the Industrial Revolution that continue to shape the geography of the West Midlands – the replica anchor from the Titanic sits as a monument just on the edge of Netherton's desolate high street.

In this sense, the socio-cultural milieu since the early nineties is one of nostalgic loops and never-realised potentials. This plays out in architecture, social policies, cultural trends and more. In *Ghosts of My Life*, Fisher uses this framework to explore the peculiar postmodern currents of popular culture, arguing that the fetishisation of retro aesthetics and the recycling of them produces a similar haunting effect and manifests as a creative and consumer malaise and inability to escape the old and the past. Fisher saw this as a condition of late-capitalism and argued that it is underpinned by 'lost futures' – futures promised by enlightenment values and their slow progression into technological advancements – a future that never came to fruition. In this state, the past is perpetually echoing in the present. Creative endeavours are, as Fisher speaks to in his analysis of the television of the early 2000s, 'Eternally suspended, never to be freed, their plight – and indeed their provenance – never to be fully explained'.⁵ He goes on to suggest that this is not just a haunting effect, it is one of being without meaning, power or prowess. He says:

while 20th-century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st century is oppressed by

²F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

³J. Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 51.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵M. Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, 2nd edn (Winchester: Zero Books, 2022), p. 6.

a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion [...] The slow cancellation of the future has been accompanied by a deflation of expectations.⁶

Sticking with music and the West Midlands, a good example might be to consider how someone in the 1940s might react to hearing a Black Sabbath song. It would feel overwhelmingly new. It would sound alien. Now consider someone from 1978 hearing early noughties bands like Editors. The reaction might be something like: *this sounds a bit like The Sisters of Mercy*. Fisher's argument is that late-capitalist culture has produced a situation that has numbed creative innovation and paralysed novel experiences.

This emptying of the future and its inevitable fatigue and inertia has links with another crucial Fisher contribution in *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016). In this book, Fisher talks through Freud's *Unheimlich* – a psychological state where something strange or estranging affects the subject in familiar situations and experiences. Freud asserts that the uncanny is something between homely and unhomely. Freud's concept is a return of the repressed past encroaching, in dreadful ways, on the present – a haunting. The uncanny is defined by the way it comes about through distinctly hauntological ways: 'What enduringly fascinates is the cluster of concepts that circulate in Freud's essay, and the way in which they often recursively instantiate the very processes to which they refer. *Repetition* and *doubling* – themselves an uncanny pair which double and repeat each other – seem to be at the heart of every "uncanny" phenomena.'⁷ As with the defining terms above, the uncanny subject is trapped in a loop. Fisher goes on to define the weird and eerie in distinct ways too. The weird is experienced as a strange occurrence where something alien invades the known: 'that which does not belong'. The eerie is experienced as an estranging occurrence where something known is emptied of its meaning: 'partially emptied of the human'.⁸ The eerie, like the uncanny, is also hauntological. In an eerie situation one is reminded of the relics or residues of the past, found in a present that has been somewhat clouded or made stagnant by the erasure.

Our exploration of Lane and O'Flynn will draw out these weird, eerie and hauntological ideas and make a case for the ways the region's literature is preoccupied by these motifs.

Eerie Consumerism, Music, and Cancelled Futures in O'Flynn's *What Was Lost*

What Was Lost draws heavily on the author's own experience of managing a record shop in the Black Country's Merry Hill Shopping Centre, recast as Green Oaks in the novel.⁹ It opens in 1984 with 10 year old Kate Meaney roaming the recently opened mall pretending to be a detective. Roughly a third of the way into the novel Kate goes missing, becoming the subject of a protracted police investigation. The story is about the loss of the future in a literal sense, then, but it also resonates culturally, emotionally and psychologically when the action shifts to 2003, and we see how Kate's

⁶Ibid., p. 18.

⁷M. Fisher, *The Weird and The Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), p. 9.

⁸Ibid., p. 11.

⁹See her interview 'Not Lost for Words,' Kathleen McCaul *The Guardian*, 6 September 2007, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/sep/06/bookerprize2007.thebookerprize>> [accessed September 25, 2024].

disappearance impacts on its four key characters: Adrian, Lisa, Theresa, and Kurt. When the focus moves to 2003, Kurt and Lisa are both working in Green Oaks, Kurt as a security guard, Lisa as a deputy manager at Your Music. Adrian, who was implicated in Kate's disappearance, hasn't been seen since fleeing the region in 1984, while Theresa, Kate's former school friend, is now a senior detective.

Before discussing the significance of music in the novel, it is worth developing the eerie as a concept, and its relationship to capitalism in O'Flynn's version of the early twenty-first-century Black Country.

Agencies of the Virtual

The novel becomes a ghost story of sorts when Kurt spots a little girl who looks like Kate wandering around at night on Green Oaks CCTV. From this point, *What Was Lost* falls into the category of 'eerie', as opposed to 'weird', as Fisher defines it: 'The eerie', he argues, 'is constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence'.¹⁰ We find both in *What Was Lost*. Kurt's first sighting is a 'failure of absence' in that Kurt sees something that shouldn't be there; however, when he sees her a second time he guides his colleague, Scott, to where he thinks Kate is standing, but Scott cannot see what Kurt sees;¹¹ this is a 'failure of presence', at least from Kurt's perspective: what *should* be there is not. Theresa also 'sees' Kate: 'One night she woke in the middle of the night to find Kate sat at the end of her bed', although her husband doesn't experience the same vision.¹² Both visions could be explained as hallucinations, then, and the haunting isn't an overt intrusion into the known world that might define it as 'weird' in Fisher's terms;¹³ rather, Kate's absent-presence contributes to a general atmosphere of oddness, incongruity and creepiness in the book.

In the second part of the novel, Kate becomes a catalyst for the solution to her own mystery. Her appearance on CCTV prompts Kurt to research her disappearance, and access a repressed memory of having literally seen her in Green Oaks on the day she went missing. Interestingly, Kate's function is suggestive of the terms in which Fisher describes hauntology: Kate is an 'agency of the virtual, with the spectre understood, not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing'.¹⁴ Kate affects change without being *literally* present in the world. Importantly, there are other 'agenc[ies] of the virtual' at play in O'Flynn's characters' lives. Both Kurt and Lisa discuss their sense of being watched in Green Oaks, for instance, and 'not just by the cameras', yet we don't know who or what is watching them.¹⁵ The idea of an absent-presence contributes to the story's eerie atmosphere, but the significance of the unseen goes further, particularly in relation to the covert forces that seem to shape the characters' lives. For instance, Lisa isn't quite sure how she ended-up working in Green Oaks, and in a relationship with her colleague Ed, who doesn't share her values. Likewise, Green Oaks customers often appear devoid of agency: the story incorporates

¹⁰Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p. 61.

¹¹O'Flynn, *What Was Lost*, pp. 133–4.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 231.

¹³Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p. 61.

¹⁴Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, p. 18.

¹⁵O'Flynn, *What Was Lost*, p. 151.

sketches of the people who frequent the mall, including shoppers who shop for no reason, scarcely able to fathom why they are there at all, except insofar as it's 'something people do'.¹⁶ What, then, is the occult force that ensnares employees like Lisa, or motivates shoppers who don't need to shop? Fisher argues that, '[T]he eerie is fundamentally tied up with questions of agency', and capitalism too 'is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing', yet exerting 'more influence than any allegedly substantial entity'.¹⁷ Likewise, Kate's ghost is an agent who influences 'without (physically) existing', manifested in a context of consumerist desire, and creating an eerie parallel to the 'eerie entity' of capital itself. Thus Kate's eerie absent-presence in the mall reflects the eerie phenomenon of capitalism.

Ostensibly Kate's ghost impacts positively on the lives of the protagonists, becoming an unseen agent for change that might free them from their capitalist conditioning. Fisher writes that, within ghost stories, 'The spectre will not allow us to settle into/for the mediocre satisfactions one can glean in a world governed by capitalist realism',¹⁸ and this is the case here: once the mystery of Kate's disappearance is solved, Lisa, Kurt and Theresa all manage to 'get away'. Theresa heads 'far north', while Lisa abandons Green Oaks for a future with Kurt, free of her partner, Ed, and the blind capitalist conformity he personifies.¹⁹ Crucially, however, while the characters escape their former lives, it's not clear what they escape to. Green Oaks represents corporate consumerism and the soulless materialism of modern life, and the book doesn't present an obvious future for the characters beyond this, other than the subversive gesture of leave-taking itself. Kate's future is cancelled in an obvious way, and Adrian, Lisa's older brother and Kate's friend, loses his future too, both figuratively, when he's implicated in Kate's disappearance, and literally when he eventually returns to commit suicide in the narrative present. As we'll go on to show, these themes are given greater cultural significance and amplitude when considered alongside the book's numerous music references.

O'Flynn's reluctance, or inability, to imagine a future for her protagonists, brings us to another of Fisher's interests: the 'cancellation of the future'.²⁰ This concept is central to his thesis in *The Ghosts of My Life*, where it applies in the first instance to a decline in cultural innovation and artistic possibility: he argues that Thatcherite policies undermined the social conditions in which musicians could produce original work. The infrastructure that facilitated artistic endeavour was gradually eroded in the late twentieth century as arts funding diminished, along with benefits and social changes like affordable housing, effectively denying artists 'the resources necessary to produce the new'.²¹ For Fisher, the consequence is a present that can only recycle the past, and a future where there's no prospect of the new: culture fails to develop in original ways, then, and the former innovations of modernism feed a present which cannot advance beyond them. However, we remain haunted by past styles and ideas, and, beyond that, the sense of thwarted possibility they embody. As Alex Reardon writes:

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 195–6.

¹⁷Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p. 11.

¹⁸Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, p. 22.

¹⁹O'Flynn, *What Was Lost*, p. 242.

²⁰Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, p. 8.

²¹Ibid., p. 15.

As we continue to go further into the cancelled future, we reach an impasse. Time keeps moving forward while culture stops. Although the future is dead and an infinitely repeating virtual past has taken its place, its absence is like a bony grip on your shoulder, which disappears as soon as you turn your head. Fisher calls this 'hauntological culture', a concept he borrows from Jacques Derrida that was originally concerned with the spectre of communism.

Fisher argues the figure of this haunting spectre cannot be fully present, but it marks a relation to what is no longer or not yet. We can apply this in two aspects: 1) what no longer exists but remains effective, which is found in the repeating of the past in art, and 2) what has not happened yet but is effective, an anticipation that shapes and undermines the present state of things. This, of course, being the promises of the future that never materialised which haunt us. However, we are no longer haunted by modernist culture, we are haunted by its disappearance [an] overwhelming melancholy produced by the acknowledgement that the promises of modernism have evaporated.²²

For Fisher this sense of loss – the disappearance of 'the promises of modernism' – has psychological as well as cultural consequences, then; a perceived loss of cultural value, and a melancholia, which, as we'll see, features in the lives of both O'Flynn and Lane's characters.

Popular Modernism and 'Real' Values

In the 1980s Adrian was a popular music connoisseur, an avid reader of the NME, with a penchant for what Fisher would call 'popular modernism'. What Fisher meant by this is succinctly expressed by Phoebe Braithwaite:

[A] kind of culture – most often found in music – which straddled the experimental and the mainstream. While popular, it required work to be fully understood, doing away with past forms, following a modernist make it new imperative [...] Pop modernism [...] embodied a sense of possibility which never fully recovered from the thoroughgoing attack it underwent in the 1980s[.]²³

Adrian is keen to cultivate the notion of taste in music, and for him its appreciation is linked to higher values, as it is generally in the moral scheme of this novel, and, as we'll see, in Lane's. O'Flynn's morally sound characters have non-mainstream taste in music (i.e. counterculture, indie, art pop, and so on), most notably Adrian himself, who befriends Kate after her dad's death. He works in his father's sweetshop, despite being a graduate, and can be contrasted with the materialist characters that populate Green Oaks in 2003, including the property obsessed Ed, or 'the manic and paranoid' Crawford, who keeps Your Music staff in a permanent state of anxiety in order to justify his management position.²⁴ It's Adrian who schools Kate and Lisa in music appreciation:

As soon as Mr Palmer left him alone in the shop, Jimmy Young's radio show would be switched off and Adrian would slip a tape into the tinny radio cassette player [...] he

²²A. Reardon, 'Hauntology and the Slow Cancellation of the Future,' *Farrago Edition Six* (2022). <<https://farragomagazine.com/article/farrago/Hauntology-and-the-Slow-Cancellation-of-the-Future/>> [accessed June 15, 2024].

²³P. Braithwaite, 'Mark Fisher's Popular Modernism,' *Tribune*, 18 January 2019, <<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2019/01/mark-fisher-kpunk-popular-modernism>> [accessed June 15, 2024].

²⁴O'Flynn, *What Was Lost*, pp. 78–9.

would always put a scrawled note on the counter: 'Now playing: Captain Beefheart, *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*. For more information just ask a member of staff[.]'²⁵

His final words to Kate are 'Keep fighting, sister. Remember the revolution will not be televised'.²⁶ Obviously the 10 year old doesn't get the Gil Scott Heron reference, but it's indicative of Adrian's desire to bring progressive counterculture sentiments into her life. The relationship between music and value is crucial to him and his sister, Lisa, who shares his enthusiasm for popular modernism, absorbing his views on the likes of Lee Scratch Perry, or Bowie's less successful career choices. She learns to become a discerning critic of music in her own right, getting 'lost in the landscape of an album or a single', accompanying her brother to gigs at the age of thirteen.²⁷ On the occasion Lisa meets Kate in 1984, the latter remarks on her 'standy-uppy' hair, offering the post-punk Lisa an opportunity to reference the indie bands who've influenced her style, such as Echo and the Bunnymen and the Cure; the young Lisa is very much in the alternative/indie tradition, at odds with commercial pop.²⁸ It is appropriate that Lisa had arranged to meet Adrian in town for a Kraftwerk gig on the night that he is questioned by the police about Kate's disappearance; he doesn't turn up, and this marks the novel's moment of transition. It's here that youth and possibility give way to death and despair in the novel: Kate dies, Adrian disappears, and Lisa is bereft. Fisher mentions the twentieth-century experimental band Kraftwerk explicitly as embodying the promise of a future – a 'future shock' – so lacking in twenty-first-century culture: the future that Kraftwerk and popular modernism represented was never delivered in the twenty-first century,²⁹ and there is a sense in which the characters' promised futures are lost here too, the cultural loss paralleling human bereavement, dispossession, and grief in the novel.

When we meet Lisa again in 2003, she's in a different world musically: it feels exactly like one in which the possibility of Fisher's 'future shock' has disappeared: Green Oaks operates with a backing track of 'canned music', and Radio Green Oaks plays anodyne pop like the Lighthouse Family.³⁰ To Lisa's frustration, Your Music recycles the same CDs annually: at one point she 'noticed that there were now twelve units across the store dominated by *Queen's Greatest Hits* Volumes 1 and 2' in order to exploit the latest TV ad campaign for the album. Lisa is appalled by the sight of people sheepishly purchasing it, seemingly oblivious to the forces that shape their desires.³¹ Significantly, the Lisa of the twenty-first century has lost her early interest in music: where she used to 'go to gigs' and 'enthuse about records', 'Now I work twelve hour days and my brain is broken and I don't seem to hear music at all'.³² Of course the canned music of the mall isn't meant to be 'enthuse[d]' about, or even heard in the sense that Lisa means; it merely lubricates the cogs of consumerism. Likewise, the music that is popular in Your Music is presented as *démodé* and lacking cultural relevance, from the remarketed hits

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 226.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 201.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁹Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, p. 8. See also D. Ambrose, ed., *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (2004–2016) (London: Repeater Books, 2018), p. 685.

³⁰O'Flynn, *What Was Lost*, p. 82.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 99.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 176, 202.

of Queen to *The Happy Sound of Ray Conniff* by Ray Conniff, the latter being a 1960s bandleader whose music offers a delightful comic contrast to Lisa's penchant for popular modernism.³³ We're back with our earlier Black Sabbath versus Editors analogy here. There is a clear distinction between the music that Lisa learned to love in her youth, and that of the mall: in the former there's promise and possibility, an element of subversion that implicitly critiques the status quo. Popular modernism is associated with cultural renewal and innovation, while the mall music suggests cultural inertia: the former represents the potential in the 1980s of generating 'future shock'; the latter is associated with the 2000s, contemporary Green Oaks, cultural death and the characters' cancelled futures. Popular modernist music is another absent-presence in the twenty-first-century sections of the novel, then; it's another element of the past that, like Kate, haunts the present with a sense of crushed hope, underscoring the sadness and frustration experienced by characters like Lisa and Kurt.

Crucially, it's only when Lisa makes the decision to leave Green Oaks at the end of the novel that she starts to appreciate music again. We are told that Lisa listens to Smog, and 'it seemed to be the first time in a long time she'd heard music'.³⁴ It is appropriate that it should be an indie artist like Smog who draws Lisa at this point: an artist whose work largely shuns the mainstream, defining itself against corporate pop. Also, Smog's aesthetic of the 90s and early 2000s embodies the kind of melancholy that Fisher associates with hauntology,³⁵ and that we'll see again in Lane's novels; we see too a hauntological interest in low-fi aesthetics in Smog's music, reflecting a sense of lost authenticity; Lisa listens to it whilst viewing an exhibition of Green Oaks history curated by Gavin: 'the sound of Bill Callahan's bitter despair went well with the bleak images' of the mall; it is a despair/melancholia that Lisa and Kurt share, and which motivates their move away from Green Oaks, but it's also an affirmation of the popular modernist aesthetic that Lisa's brother, Adrian, would have celebrated.³⁶

In *What Was Lost*, then, popular modernist music takes on a symbolic force in the light of Kate's cancelled future, and the loss of promise, possibility, and innocence that her disappearance represents in the broader cultural sense. The positive values, potential for change, and dreams of an alternative future associated with popular modernism are eclipsed by a shallow consumerist present. The anticipated future of the 80s, like Kate's future, hasn't been delivered, and this loss is fittingly acknowledged by Lisa's choice of listening material at the end: the 'bitter despair' that motivates her own leave-taking in search of an alternative to Green Oaks, and the neoliberalist nightmare the future has delivered. Sadly, as suggested, the novel, for all its eloquent satire and justifiable cynicism, doesn't offer an alternative to the mall mentality; rather, Green Oaks represents a current and pervasive postmodern mindset: a world devoid of meaning and value where consumerism is just 'something people do', indicative of the uncritical thinking that informs Fisher's notion of 'capitalist realism', where space for a viable anti-capitalism seems inconceivable.³⁷ O'Flynn's characters seem unable to

³³O'Flynn, *What Was Lost*, p. 143.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 215.

³⁵See Fisher, *Ghosts*: 'The kind of melancholia I'm talking [is] a refusal to adjust to what current conditions call "reality" – even if the cost of that refusal is that you feel like an outcast in your own time' (24).

³⁶O'Flynn, *What Was Lost*, p. 215.

³⁷See M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

think beyond their ideological constraints, or conceive of viable alternatives to the system that blights their lives: their choice is restricted to acceptance or flight.

The Black Country, and specifically the Merry Hill Centre, provides a perfect arena in which to explore these themes. In the 1980s, the construction of the Centre on the site of the former Round Oak steel works near Dudley reflected the regional changes we associate with Thatcher's new liberalism, and the deindustrialisation of the region. As the consumerist present eclipsed the industrial and manufacturing past, the character and complexion of the area changed beyond recognition. Dudley, for instance, often cited as the unofficial capital of the Black Country, experienced catastrophic decline: 'with a population of almost 200,000 inhabitants, 70% of the traditional retailers disappeared when [...] Merry Hill was built in the 1980s'.³⁸ But the loss wasn't merely socio-economic: for O'Flynn, the shopping centre that supersedes traditional retail is a place of simulacra and surfaces, where consumerist dreams are countered by a dark, eerie reality, characterised by an inexplicable absence:

the parallel unseen universe of the service corridors. Mile upon mile of pipes, wires, ventilator shafts, fuse cupboards, security barriers, fire hoses. Like an illuminated cave network, narrow passages would abruptly bloom into cavernous loading bays and other lanes would lead nowhere. Everything glowed grey, everything smelled of hot dust[.]³⁹

Such is the soulless entity that replaced the old factory; there's a sense in which something has been replaced by nothing: a realm of cavernous emptiness and blind alleys. The lanes that 'lead nowhere' parallel the lives that lead nowhere in her novel, the cancelled futures, and the sadness that pervades her world. In several interviews O'Flynn shows that she is conscious of the many ways in which social transformation and loss in the region precipitate other forms of loss, something she strives to convey:

There were various forms of loss that I wanted to explore in the book. The loss of a child, the loss of that childhood sense of purpose, the loss of a landscape, the loss of direction in life[.]⁴⁰

The interconnection of 'various forms of loss' is convincingly depicted in the novel, and this is what gives the theme of loss its force. Environmental and socio-economic transformations have psychological and cultural consequences in O'Flynn's story: the 'childhood sense of purpose' animating the lives of her characters in the 80s, is replaced by their 'loss of direction' in the early twentieth-first century, but their lost promise, like the promise of 'popular modernism', continues to haunt that world. We feel its lack, like a haunting, and we also feel that it will never be fully exorcised, at least not for Lisa and Kurt. In O'Flynn's version of Merry Hill, the old factory of Green Oaks, like Round Oak, is gone, Kate and Adrian are dead, the promised futures of popular modernist culture are cancelled, leaving a legacy of 'bitter despair'. What haunts Lisa and Kurt in the present is the feeling that there *should* be something better: what this is, exactly, cannot be articulated; all we know for sure is that they must leave Green Oaks to find it.

³⁸A. O. Padilla, 'The impact of Out-of-town Shopping Centres on Town-centre Retailers and Employment: The Case of the Region of Murcia,' *Land Use Policy*, 65 (2017), 277–86 (abstract).

³⁹O'Flynn, *What Was Lost*, p. 91.

⁴⁰Interview with Catherine O'Flynn, *Vulpes Libris* (2008) <<https://vulpeslibris.wordpress.com/2008/03/12/interview-with-catherine-oflynn/>> [accessed June 15, 2024]

Hauntological Space in the Novels of Joel Lane

Joel Lane's fiction presents the dark and often seedy underbelly of the West Midlands: places of crime, depravity and the supernatural. Like O'Flynn, his characters deal with loss and lack, and are often aimlessly wandering. They too cling to underground music scenes, and the strange currents of music subcultures forge their identities. Unlike Flynn's focus on commercial and retail simulacra, Lane's landscapes explore post-industrial ruins and waste grounds, but as with O'Flynn, Lane's region is odd and out-of-place. Peter Coleborn describes Lane's settings as 'like reading a map of the tragedy of that city and its environs',⁴¹ but Lane is mapping more than just a place in decline – it is an emotional and dramatic cartography of its *genius loci*. Chris Morgan refers to Lane as 'The great chronicler of local slum estates, crumbling tower blocks, derelict factories and dark canals': a realm in which the natural and the unnatural are in a state of flux.⁴² One is never sure of the boundaries between the real and unreal, the dead and alive, the past and present: we're at a threshold where strange things resurface. Like O'Flynn, this in-betweenness creates an atmosphere of eeriness, built from psychic loops and hauntological experiences.

Looping, Haunting, Echoing

Joel Lane's debut novel, *From Blue to Black* (2000), opens with the line 'It was the end of summer'. This is a cliché in many ways, but Lane is a knowing writer, and here it signals not just the end of warmth, youth and goodness, but also our ability to grasp life, experience, memory and moment outside the clichéd echo of things said and re-said across time. It suggests a hauntological current where clichés are re-employed in an attempt to anchor the swirling present-future. Derrida argued that metaphor or cliché 'nevertheless remains active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest'. In this instance Lane is expressing 'a metaphor par excellence, a metaphorical redoubling, an ellipsis of an ellipsis'⁴³ and identifying the hauntological loop where, to use Tom Grimwood's words, 'clichés are themselves perpetual reinventions of language'.⁴⁴ It is, as Lane's narrator says, the 'echoes of the past [which do] my imagining for me'.⁴⁵ This sense of dependency on the past is reinforced by the chapter titles – *Feedback*, *Reverb*, *Static*, *Playback* – reflecting the musical theme, and attaching it to motifs of looping, haunting, echoing expressions: expressions, both human and nonhuman, created in the past and re-emerging in the present. This is the tone and narrative thrust of Lane's novel, then, built from off-kilter glimpses of pasts and the present that frame the characters' experiences.

The novel tells the tale of a Black Country post-punk band, Triangle. Its frontman, Karl, is a troubled genius consumed by his past traumas, and the encroaching threats of the present. He exists in a hauntological space between madness and impassioned creativity. On the face of it, this is another cliché, a looping rock and roll narrative

⁴¹P. Coleborn, 'Foreword,' in *Something Remains: Joel Lane and Friends*, ed. by P. Coleborn and P. E. Dungeate (Staffordshire: The Alchemy Press, 2016), Kindle eBook.

⁴²C. Morgan, 'Joel Lane, Poet', in *Something Remains* (Staffordshire: The Alchemy Press, 2016) Kindle eBook.

⁴³J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1985), pp. 213–29.

⁴⁴T. Grimwood, *The Shock of the Same: An Anti-Philosophy of Clichés* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), p. 77.

⁴⁵Lane, *From Blue to Black*, p. 9.

that is well rehearsed – we think of Jim Morrison, Ian Curtis, Kurt Cobain, Richey Edwards – and, in light of this, Karl’s trajectory seems preordained. We feel from the outset that Karl cannot be saved, and his suicide is inevitable: a psychological, cultural and aesthetic imperative. Thus, there’s a sense in which Karl is a ghost even before he dies. The novel reconfigures the cliché through the grotesque beauty of Lane’s writing.⁴⁶ He reclaims the cliché as a critique of the present. Mark Fisher speaks about the rock and roll cliché-myth of Kurt Cobain in these terms:

In his dreadful lassitude and objectless rage, Cobain seemed to have given wearied voice to the dependency of the generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened. Cobain knew he was just another piece of spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV; knew that his every move was a cliché scripted in advance, knew that even realising it is a cliché. The impasse that paralysed Cobain is precisely the one that Fredric Jameson described: like postmodern culture in general, Cobain found himself in ‘a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, where all that is left is to imitate dead styles in the imaginary museum.’⁴⁷

This is the issue that Triangle face in Lane’s novel. Too late for the great era of rock music’s innovations, they are caught in a non-culture of spectacle, cover versions, samples and reworkings. Karl is the Cobain-like frontman in this set up, struggling to make his mark and search for meaning in an exhausted culture. His future feels both haunted by and determined by historical precedent, and the countless narratives that retell it. This romantic self-destruction is invoked in order to interrogate and expose the paucity of the culture that Karl occupies. In keeping with the spirit of hauntology, the cliché is something that seems to shape Karl’s life without actually existing in a material sense.

Shift into Neoliberalism

Karl’s boyfriend and bass player, David, is our narrative guide through the chaos of their intoxicated relationship and the band’s burgeoning success. The novel tracks the band’s ambitions and successes alongside the difficult relationship. The indie scene, the love story and Triangle’s early accomplishments are set against the backdrop of early 90s Birmingham and the Black Country. In this place, at this time of political and social turmoil, the ruins of industry haunt the region in the green-grey, off-kilter landscapes of the West Midlands. In the music scene, 1980s shoegaze and modernist-pop have been usurped by Stock, Aiken and Waterman, but the underground is starting to make way for Grunge. Three terms of Thatcher’s free market and tough decisions have transformed the UK’s economic situation, but there are still two terms of John Major to look forward to. This is an important part of Lane’s world-building – late capitalism’s shift into neoliberalism. This eerie spatial frame, full of residues and relics of recent pasts is where strange, outsider subcultures try to make room for themselves. The Black Country and Birmingham are perfect locations for this exploration. It is, as David

⁴⁶Grotesque seems apt here. It is the caricaturing of existing tropes or myths for the effect of disgust and sympathy. It takes the known or the established and defamiliarizes through pastiche or burlesque modes. In this, we have a self-referential copy, a refrain, a simulacra.

⁴⁷Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 9.

explains, ‘a place midway between reality and dream’.⁴⁸ Once the heartlands of industry, the landscape is now eerie. Cities, towns and suburbs of the West Midlands have had their labour and engineering history stripped from their streets, and yet ruined markers, now emptied of purpose, still sit to haunt residents. This is a post-industrial Gothic aesthetic – a place in flux, contradiction and transition.

As with much of Lane’s oeuvre, the region plays an important part. In his short fiction we see regional towns and spaces, real and imagined, alienated, disintegrating and full of abject and uncanny imagery. *From Blue to Black* is no different. Early in the story, Lane provides this description:

One end is the student ghetto: a cluster of second-hand bookshops, small record shops and Balti restaurants. The houses are mostly divided up into bedsits. The other end is a provisional red light district hemmed in by police and local vigilantes [...] In between, there’s a mile of silence; trees lining the road like huge tattered feathers, shaking in the wind. The scale of it, the repetition, always made me feel lost.⁴⁹

This is more than mere cityscape. It is a disquieting and estranging aesthetic. Importantly, the current is formed from a purling landscape built from the ‘in-between’ ‘the silence’ and ‘the repetition’. Again, the loop or feedback sits at its heart. Karl and David walk ‘along the canal’ and we share the view of ‘the backs of disused factories: broken glass, rusted wire netting, dreamlike silhouettes of machinery’.⁵⁰ It’s in these real-unreal places, filled with post-industrial imagery, that the two lovers find romantic and artistic connection. Much of their love affair, their emotional explorations and Karl’s lyrics are borne out these underbelly, half-lit locations. In another example, we see Lane’s refrain of weaving rural and urban, natural and manmade to similar effect.

Beyond the terraced streets, we could see the backdrop of green hills. From a distance, the elaborate Victorian frontages of the factories and civic halls looked impressive; but close-up you could see the sprayed messages and the chicken-wire over the blackened glass.⁵¹

Details of the setting have an uncanny and haunted/ing quality; urban gothic spaces of ruin, decay, and things emptied of meaning. In their emptiness and decay they seem to become open to potential.

As with *What Was Lost*, *From Blue to Black* combines elements of social realism with a persistent underlying strangeness. In these isolating and eerie locations of refracted-reality, Karl and David encounter faceless figures and shadowy men. Early in the novel, David is walking home after his first encounter with Triangle and first conversation with Karl:

Just before the traffic lights on the edge of Cannon Hill, I saw a rain-blurred figure coming towards me slowly. Was he drunk, or was the wind so strong he could hardly push through it? As he got closer his face didn’t seem to clarify. I thought he was going to walk straight into me, but I couldn’t bring him into focus... Then somehow he passed me without getting any closer. You know how sometimes a gust of wind can bring the rain together so it makes a twisted shape and almost casts a shadow? It was like that. But rain doesn’t have a face.⁵²

⁴⁸Lane, *From Blue to Black*, p. 22.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵¹Lane, *From Blue to Black*, p. 93.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 6.

The introduction to the setting and characters, then, is one of resentment and unfulfilment. The characters exist with, in Lacanian terms, a sense of lack or *l'angoisse*.⁵³ In a haunted and hard to define landscape, they are, like O'Flynn's characters, marginal and aimlessly wandering. Much like *Weird Fiction's* inexplicable dread, that Lane draws on so frequently in his work, they are unaware of the unseen forces shaping their lives. These shadow figures move in and out of the narrative; even Karl is described in similar terms: 'In the half light he looked like a charcoal sketch',⁵⁴ and 'Half his face was brightly lit, the other half invisible'.⁵⁵ The blend of banal reality and the strange and nightmarish becomes a chilling motif throughout the novel. It creates an atmosphere of uncanniness – in keeping with traditions of doppelgangers and nonnormative bodies – that loops throughout the text like the feedback and reverb humming of the band's recordings and live shows.

There are other moments of eeriness developed explicitly in terms of sound and disharmony too. Occult, or supernatural, sonic charges catch the reader and characters in menacing undercurrents:

The music pounded and surged around us, an enclosure without walls. I could see a point of red light on the tape deck. The tape reached its conclusion and juddered to a halt, without the slow fade we added later on. Against the level whine of the machine, I heard Karl's breathing.⁵⁶

Triangle abandon some early recordings due to unidentifiable sonic interference. At a gig, a sound whispers around the performers. A radio show erupts into static. The live act is described as 'a deep blue-black pulse that held you down and stroked you into pain'.⁵⁷ These sonic loops and dissonances lead Karl to the conclusion that,

The music can't die. But that's the really terrible thing. No sound ever dies. It echoes through the universe, breaking up. They're all floating around us. In mindless orbit. Some day, you'll hear them all again.⁵⁸

David later states, 'You can't record ghosts on a four-track',⁵⁹ but that is not Karl's point: the sound that never dies is one of a failed future, not entirely spectral and not entirely manmade. One that had, in its initial moment, a visceral power, but then dissipates into the infinite expanse of other sounds.⁶⁰

This plays out in the band's lyrics too. Lines quoted from the song 'From the Distance' which closes, 'The train runs empty down the track/Fades with the night/From blue to black/Wave goodbye to the future/It's never coming back'.⁶¹ In this overtly hauntological lyric, Lane summons Fisher's notion of never being able to fully imagine our futures because every symbol of narrative has been used-up and reworked

⁵³J. Lacan and W. Granoff, 'Fetishism: The Symbolic, The Imaginary and The Real,' in *Perversions: Psychodynamics and Therapy*, ed. by S. Lorand and M. Balint (New York: Random House, 1956), p. 270.

⁵⁴Lane, *From Blue to Black*, p. 7.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶⁰Lane draws on *Weird Fiction* again here – the inexplicable and futile dread of the infinite cosmos as conveyed in works such as H P Lovecraft and Robert Aikman. Lane also draws our attention to the trappings of mass media in the late twentieth century as a Hauntological experience.

⁶¹Lane, *From Blue to Black*, p. 45.

to the point of meaninglessness. Culture is a blending of blue and black shades, and emptiness; it's appropriate that, as the song ends, the band leave 'the stage in darkness'.⁶² This is heightened by the way the band speak of themselves too; they talk of their style and sound in terms of what has come before them: Husker du, Joy Division, Tindersticks, bands that, much like Fisher's Kraftwerk, held a pattern of dark futurity in their sound. Triangle's identity is one of reconfiguring past ideas, and ideas based on a failed realisation of futures to come. Maria Mulvaney talks of this as 'an eating of the past' and says that 'although initially experienced as a nourishing eruption of pleasure, is still a product of loss'.⁶³ Karl and David know this. Karl, in particular, who is in turn, influenced by his own personal and psychological 'eating of the past'. So, much of the novel is an exploration of this painful journey of trying to create something of oneself and for oneself in a time when, to paraphrase Richey Edwards, *Forever is Delayed*.⁶⁴ In Lacanian terms we might say it is 'the analytic premise of identifying not with somebody or something [...] but rather identifying with the impenetrable and unquantifiable void from which desire and enjoyment take their contours, a kind of dis-identification'.⁶⁵ This is expressed in a scene when Karl and David attend a club too:

Paper lampshades glowed flesh-pink or electric blue. Skinny teenage boys mimed shutting themselves up, swallowing pills. Couples writhed in the twilight zone between dancing and foreplay. Everything was on the way to becoming something else.⁶⁶

Again, we see the motif of shadowed figures – those who are not full and complete. We also see 'flesh-pink' lighting, summoning the organic in distinctly abject ways, perhaps leading readers to imagine Ed Gein's evil interior decorations.⁶⁷ The abject, the uncanny and the activity within that setting makes the haunted/ing manifest.

From Blue to Black places the region and its inhabitants as being in positions of flux, contradiction and transition, but ultimately lost and fated to never reach the new of the promised transitioned state. Lane gives us people and places that are attempting to understand and come to terms with post-industrial and neoliberal upheaval. This manifests itself within the novel in uncanny ways, giving rise to sonic, ghostly, psychological and cultural loops – hauntings. Karl and David, being marginal themselves, deliberately hunt out these space-times – dilapidated housing estates, ruins of factories, patches of woodland behind industrial estates – and use them to explore their own sense of loss and lack. This is exacerbated by the post-punk, cliché ridden culture they accidentally find themselves born into. In Michael O'Rourke's words 'Persistence, endurance, obduracy, refusing to go, to go home is held in tension here with the Derridean

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³M. Mulvaney, 'Erotic Effusions in Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories,' *Social Text Online* (2014) <https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/erotic-effusions-in-time-binds-queer-temporalities-queer-histories/> [accessed June 2, 2024].

⁶⁴Manic Street Preachers, 'Roses in the Hospital,' *Gold Against The Soul* (Sony Music, 1993).

⁶⁵E. Watson, 'Après Coup in Extremis: Futurism and A-Historicity in the Work of Freeman, Lacan and Woolf,' *Social Text Online* (2014) <https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/apres-coup-in-extremis-futurism-and-a-historicity-in-the-work-of-freeman-lacan-and-woolf-2/> [accessed June 2, 2024].

⁶⁶Lane, *From Blue to Black*, p. 95.

⁶⁷Gein was a serial killer in the late 1950s who was accused of grave robbery and murder. One of his infamous crimes was that he made lampshades and other pieces of furniture from the remains of his victims.

im/possible, im/passible, the indeterminacy of moving towards what is to-come'.⁶⁸ It is the portrayal of communities and subcultures struggling with the current of neoliberal, post-industrial and late capitalist change, and the haunting of a well-established and ordered cultural makeup. The result is loss, lack, marginality, stasis. This is graphically underscored at the end by the protagonist's suicide: as with Adrian's suicide in *What Was Lost*, Karl's in *From Blue to Black* marks the symbolic death of the popular modernist's dream.

Same Shit, Different Arse: *The Blue Mask* (2003)

Lane is a more overtly political writer than O'Flynn, and this is particularly the case in his follow-up novel, *The Blue Mask* (2003), which was the second instalment of a planned trilogy (the third was written, but remains unpublished after Lane's death in 2013). Here Lane has his characters give explicit voice to the sense of political disenchantment and cultural exhaustion underpinning *From Blue to Black* (a novel which would have been written during Tony Blair's first term in office). The sequel opens with one character's observation: 'Labour, then the Tories, then Labour again. Same shit, different arse'.⁶⁹ While the story begins on the eve of New Labour's victory, disillusionment is anticipated, and one character's remark 'of course it'll be different when Labour get in' is meant to be heavily ironic for the contemporary reader.⁷⁰ For Neil, there's a sense in which old political struggles have been replaced by acceptance and complacency: 'There wasn't a struggle anymore. Just a world full of shit'.⁷¹ Later in the book both Neil and Matt underscore their sense of frustration by destroying their Labour membership cards.⁷²

This book has the same setting as *From Blue to Black*, exploring the same culture and social milieu; the characters remember Triangle fondly as a local band whose initial success was curtailed by tragedy, and their failure haunts the sequel, as does the suicide of their lead singer. The historical moment – New Labour's election – gives us a clear context in which to retrospectively interpret Triangle's failure: Triangle formed at a time when it still seemed feasible for a band to be original in Fisher's sense, embodying the popular modernist aesthetic that he valued, but their potential was curtailed by the death of their tormented genius; all that remains in Lane's sequel is the ghost of their possibility and integrity. Indeed, ghosts haunt every page of the sequel, which maintains the same eerie atmosphere as *From Blue to Black*, from the disfigured protagonist's 'ghost face', to the ghosts that haunt the characters' dreams, and nightmares throughout the novel.⁷³ We're told, for instance, that 'Across the skyline', Gary could see 'ghosts sitting and walking'; Vince 'was seeing ghosts all the time', and when Neil and Matt make love, the former thinks he is 'seeing people who'd died in the house'.⁷⁴ All of this adds to the disorientating weirdness of *The Blue Mask*. Triangle also

⁶⁸M. O'Rourke, 'Time's Tangle,' *Social Text Online* (2014) <https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/times-tangles/> [accessed June 2, 2024].

⁶⁹J. Lane, *The Blue Mask* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2003), p. 8.

⁷⁰Lane, *The Blue Mask*, p. 11.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 150–1, 167, 78.

has a ghostly presence in this sequel: significantly, Neil and Matt have sex whilst listening to Triangle's album, and we can see this as a transient escape from the present, the world where Triangle's promised future – the value implicit in popular modernism – seems absent. This is another haunting, then, happening at a time when Triangle is now dead; they struggled to assert themselves in the early 90s, a culture already mired in cliché, had limited success, but now that struggle is clearly over. The political parallels are made clear – *The Blue Mask* reflects a world where, 'Like music, politics has become a tissue of samples and overdubs. The best we can hope for is a decent remix'.⁷⁵ A 'decent remix' wouldn't have satisfied Karl, just as it wouldn't have satisfied O'Flynn's Adrian. Readers might also remember the soundtrack to New Labour's 1997 victory was D:Ream's 1993 pop song 'Things Can Only Get Better' which only adds to the hauntological irony. Interestingly, the song only made it to 21 in the charts on its release and became what the industry refer to as a 'sleeper hit' after it was remixed and hit the number 1 spot a year later. It's the ghost of the original that John Prescott was dad dancing to that May evening in 1997. A ghostly remix that ushered in Blairite politics seems appropriate to the motifs and dilemmas of Lane's *The Blue Mask*: a potential that never fully played out but has seemingly never retired too.

Conclusion

Black Country history speaks through O'Flynn and Lane's stories with astonishing force. Despite occasional name changes, their locations are very specific, and the action is rooted precisely in time. The historical moment is well-defined, then, and as we've seen, the legacy of Midlands deindustrialisation informs their writing heavily, from O'Flynn's reimagining of Merry Hill, with its spurious promise of Enterprise Zone renewal, to Lane's streets of industrial decline, with their broken and graffitied exteriors, and their 'twilight zone' interiors. In the late twentieth-century, the Black Country was transformed into a meagre, melancholic, and haunted place for both writers.

We argue that the Black Country, as depicted in the region's literature, becomes this site of individual and communal decline and is shown through a deliberate facing of the abject or uncanny. The region has moved from a manufacturing-based economy to one of service, from skilled and semiskilled labour to professional and technical, from an infrastructure based on making and transporting to one of communications. This manifests in culture in many ways; sense of place and identity being two important markers. These changes affected the way previously industrial communities thought about themselves and their place in social order. In places like Dudley, much of the workforce was based in steelworks, construction and manufacturing. These industries were set within the landscape of purpose-built housing estates, populated by workers and their families, places of communal worship (church) and leisure (the pubs and working men's clubs). Ned Williams makes this point, saying 'Chain producing works like Noah Hingley's became complete communities in themselves where everybody lived in close proximity, worked together, drank in the same pubs and worshipped in

⁷⁵Lane, *The Blue Mask*, p. 71.

the same chapels'.⁷⁶ For a great many life was difficult, work was hard and unfulfilling, conditions were unhealthy and often dangerous.

Working-class culture, for many was oppressive and grounded in a conservative, traditionalist nature. Nevertheless, the work was intrinsic to the communal sense of place and identity. These towns and cities have been on the frontline of post-industrial upheaval – witnessing factories become retail centres, pubs and local shops boarded-up, resulting in unemployment and workforce emasculation. The industrial foundation of community is lost, changing the geographical, social and cultural landscape. Williams provides an excellent description of how Netherton in Dudley appears today, having faced the challenges of deindustrialisation:

It is now difficult to imagine the number of small pits that covered the area during the first half of the twentieth century, or imagine the landscape through which canals were built [...] the legacy on the ground has been subsidence. Subsidence meant that much of the old Netherton had to be replaced [...] by the middle of the twentieth century Netherton was an interesting mixture of the old and the not so old. Add to that the developments that have taken place since the middle of the twentieth century and we have a very complex landscape that now forms today's Netherton [...] Can Netherton and similar Black Country towns ever be more than just dormitories in the modern conurbation?⁷⁷

The post-industrial UK is a space where cultures and communities find themselves with a constant reminder of their achievements, resulting in pride, nostalgia and loss. They are communities in an eerie position, ripe for phantoms to be a constant absent-present.

Alongside the usual markers of post-industrial landscapes, the Black Country proves itself as something more too: it is overlooked next to its neighbour, Birmingham, which holds more cultural capital; it is a defined state with its own name, flag, set of dialects, heritage, but it has no fixed boundary. This creates a parochial exclusivity but also suggests it is as much a state of mind or idea as it is a 'real place'. Lane and O'Flynn's portrayal of the Black Country and its characters are in positions of flux, contradiction and transition. They are lost people in lost districts. The places described in these works are ones where urban decay and the weeds of semi-rural space compete for territory. These writers share a sense of pride, loss and nostalgia for the area's industrial heritage and working-class ethics, as well as a sense of despair towards the ruins, waste grounds and new enterprises that now replace it. They express an infatuation with the contradictory meetings of green and grey spaces and in exploring narrative possibilities for their characters in the murky midst of these absent futures. In terms of cultural and geographical context, and in thematic content, they explore the ghostly, the uncanny and the open-ended gap of cancelled potentials.

Both authors were West Midlands residents through much of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, perfectly placed to assess the regional impact of Thatcherism, particularly its cultural consequences: O'Flynn as a local record shop manager, Lane as an indie music aficionado, intimately acquainted with the local music scene; they reveal themselves as acutely sensitive to the zeitgeist, and are remarkably similar in their emotional response. When viewed through the lens of Mark Fisher's

⁷⁶N. Williams, *Dudley & Netherton Remembered* (Stroud: The History Press, 2010), p. 109.

⁷⁷N. Williams, *Netherton: People and Places* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008), pp. 7–8.

writing, the significance of that response, and the affinities between O’Flynn and Lane become clear. Their characters’ melancholia is a reaction to a perceived loss of values, as is their privileging of popular modernism. In both, we see how a stalled culture reflects the political climate: from the neoliberalism that facilitates the consumer values in *Green Oaks*, to the ‘same shit’ conservatism of New Labour in *Lane*. Neither novelist is able to imagine a future for their heroes: those who survive the end of these novels are set to continue lives blighted by estrangement, suicide, disfigurement and melancholia. Adrian’s suicide and Kurt and Lisa’s leave-taking in *What Was Lost*, like Karl’s suicide in *From Blue to Black* are responses to the same cultural phenomenon, and a social context in which, to use Fisher’s words, ‘we’ve got increasingly accustomed to the idea that we won’t really hear anything new again’.⁷⁸

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

R. M. Francis is a writer from the Black Country. He is a lecturer in Creative and Professional Writing at the University of Wolverhampton. In 2019 he was the inaugural David Bradshaw Writer in Residence at Oxford University and in 2020–22 he was Poet in Residence for the Black Country Geological Society. He is the author of five poetry Chapbook collections and, in 2020, Smokestack Books published his first full length collection, *Subsidence*. He has published two novels, *Bella* (2020) and *The Wrenna* (2021), both with Wild Pressed Books. In 2023 his collection of poems, essays and fieldnotes, *The Chain Coral Chorus*, came out with Play Dead Press, and Poe Girl Publications published his horror short story collection, *Ameles/Currents of Unmindfulness*. He is reviews editor for the *Journal of Class and Culture*.

Paul McDonald was a Senior Lecturer in American Literature and Course Leader for Creative Writing at the University of Wolverhampton, where his research focused largely on comedy. He is the author of twelve books, including three poetry collections and three comic novels, which explore aspects of popular music, literature, and social relations in the Black Country/West Midlands of the mid- to late twentieth century. His critical writing encompasses a wide range of topics, including the fiction of the Industrial Midlands and neglected Black Country authors, which he examined in *Fiction from the Furnace: A Hundred Years of Black Country Writing* (2002); other critical works include *Laughing at the Darkness: Postmodernism and American Humour* (2011) and *The Philosophy of Humour* (2012).

⁷⁸A. Broaks, ‘Did You Miss the Future: Mark Fisher Interviewed,’ *Crack Magazine* (12 September 2014) <<https://crackmagazine.net/article/long-reads/mark-fisher-interview/>> [accessed June 15, 2024].