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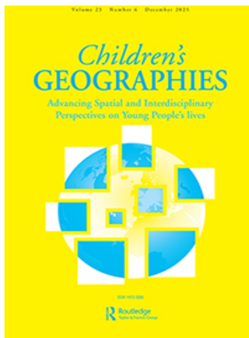

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Mining-nostalgias: youth speculative fictions about place and the future

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how young people in a deindustrialised mining town in South Wales, UK engage with history, place, and futurity through writing speculative fiction. As part of a research-creation project, students aged 14–15 composed dystopian stories set in imagined futures of their local geography and later performed their work in a public showcase. As barometers of lived atmospheres, the students' speculative fictions register how local histories of extraction can shape their sense of place, while also articulating refusals of dominant narratives of decline. The paper develops the concept of *mining-nostalgias* to describe the affective and material residues that young people inherit and rework through creative practice. By positioning speculative fiction as a method for attuning to social atmospheres and affective inheritances, the paper contributes to youth geographies by showing how young people negotiate the historical hauntings of place while imagining alternative futures.

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Introduction

This paper examines a speculative fiction project with students in a deindustrialised mining town in South Wales, UK. Students aged 14–15 wrote dystopian stories set in imagined futures of their town, drawing on local geographies, histories, and the material legacies of extraction. I read their stories, focus groups, and performances to trace how past and present circulate through their writing. I use the term *mining-nostalgias* to describe the affective and material residues of extraction that the students inherit and actively rework.

My approach is literary: I read the students' work for atmosphere – for how mood, geography, and history register through language and tone. In doing so, I draw briefly on Raymond Williams for his attention to the lived, affective textures of place that continue to shape cultural life in South Wales. Sylvia Wynter's work on genres of the human helps me frame how narrative practices inherit and unsettle social orders, and Kathryn Yusoff's critical geographies guide my attention to how extraction and material histories persist in both land and story. I also think with theorists of nostalgia to explore how attachments to the past are mined, circulated, and transformed in creative practice.

This paper contributes to youth geographies by positioning speculative writing as more-than-representational: as a method for thinking with place and for sensing how social and material histories endure in the present and imagined futures. Attending to the atmospheres that move through

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students' texts, I show how creative writing can work as a mode of inquiry, revealing the affective and imaginative infrastructures of post-industrial life.

Background: place, project, and context

This paper draws on data from a larger project on speculative fiction I conducted in schools in Australia, Canada, England, and Wales.[1] This paper focuses on one site, the former mining town Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales, UK.[2]

The South Wales Valleys have a long mining history that rose to global significance in the 1800s. The mountains and valleys rich in coal and iron ore were heavily mined during the Industrial Revolution: in the 1820s Merthyr Tydfil accounted for 40% of Britain's ore exports, and by the 1840s, Dowlais Ironworks was the largest steelworks in the world. Mining continued in the region for another century before declining in the late twentieth century with colliery closures. The region remains steeped in mining histories and solidarities, both tragic and hopeful, including the Aberfan disaster in 1966, when a spoil tip collapsed onto a primary school, killing 116 children and 28 adults. From the 1960s to the 1980s, as deep-cast mines closed, towns along the coal seams suffered economically. The last open-cast mine in Merthyr Tydfil closed in 2023, the same year students wrote their stories.[3]

This project works beside – and departs from – a growing body of research concerned with young people's entanglements with post-industrial landscapes especially the South Wales Valleys (Elliott, Thomas, and Byrne 2020). The arts-informed works of Renold and Ivinson (Renold et al. 2020; Renold and Ivinson 2019) trace how the affective, and more-than-human afterlives of deindustrialisation manifest viscerally in bodies and community life. These projects have helped shape how post-industrial spaces are understood in terms of gendered (Ivinson and Renold 2020) and intergenerational social histories (Bright and Ivinson 2019), often registering through what Gordon (2008) has framed as 'social haunting,' while oriented toward participatory activism and social justice. This ongoing work has been crucial for understanding post-industrial youth life in the Valleys. It has primarily focused on participation, embodiment, and relational practice as analytic sites. My project moves alongside this work but departs from it by treating literary form itself as method and theory. Rather than asking how young people experience post-industrial space, I ask how genre, mood, and storytelling inherit and reorganise those spaces – how social haunting is mediated, intensified, or unsettled through speculative fictioning. Additionally, while much arts-informed research unfolds in community or extra-curricular settings, my project unfolds within the institutional parameters of secondary school.

Methods: speculative fiction and research-creation framework

The umbrella term speculative fiction encompasses novels, films, and other media that imagine worlds different from our own. While speculative fiction does not represent the current world realistically, its alternative, extrapolated, or fantastical narratives operate as ways of thinking critically about the present (Delany 2012; Truman 2019c). Classics taught in schools include Orwell's *1984*, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Jackson's 'The Lottery,' with more recent inclusions such as Collins' *The Hunger Games*, Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, and Coleman's *Terra Nullius* in the UK, Canada, and Australia respectively. Primary and junior secondary students frequently write science fiction or fantasy as part of school creative writing units. This project differed in that I asked students to investigate their town/cities' histories and then to situate their writings on the future in their own geography. The project foregrounded place as both a material and imaginative agent in their writing. This practice is surprisingly uncommon in creative writing units in schools according to the teachers in Canada, Australia, and the UK. In all sites the teachers reported that the students at first found it odd, and difficult to have to think about their own city or town in composing their stories.

Research-creation is a mode of research in which creative practices – in this case, student-authored fictional stories – serve as the method of inquiry (Truman 2023; Truman, Shannon, and Yusoff 2023). My research-creation praxis sits within feminist materialist traditions that understand writing as a mode of world-making (Haraway 2013; Truman 2019a). Wynter's discussions of narration inflect this approach by foregrounding how narrative (and narrative forms) emerge from material and geographic histories and participate in co-composing the worlds they describe (Wynter 1971). In this project, speculative fiction operates as a situated method for tracing the present: the imaginative future worlds that students compose about their town give insight into the social, material, and affective conditions that structure their everyday environments.

Pedagogical setting and collaboration

I contacted the school through the Headteacher and Head of Faculty, whom I have known since working at the school in 2011. They connected me with the English teachers, who became key collaborators. The teachers integrated the project into a summer-term unit on dystopian fiction (May-July 2023).[4] I introduced the project via video, explaining my interest in geographically specific speculative fiction as a method for attending to the present and future of place. I then visited the classrooms and shared the *Situated Speculations*[5] resource I developed, which included tasks such as researching local geography and history and prompts for world-building in speculative fiction.

The teachers led the unit, embedding resources on character development, dystopian genre conventions, local history and geography, miners' strikes, and selected clips from the film *Pride* (about the miner's strike and LGBTQ + solidarity). At the end of the term, I collected students' stories, rough work, and classroom resources and conducted interviews with teachers and focus groups with students. The following year (Year 10), students collaborated with the art teacher to produce visual artwork accompanying their narratives. The project culminated in a public showcase featuring readings, performances, and visual displays in spring 2024.

Structure of the paper

The rest of the paper unfolds through three sections. I begin with the students' speculative fictions, reading for atmosphere and affect to trace how narrative, place, and the material legacies of extraction circulate through their dystopian writings. In the second section I turn to student focus groups to consider how mining's residues persist in their everyday lives. The final section centres on the community showcase, where I theorise the collective atmospheres that crystallize into what I call *mining-nostalgias:* forms of nostalgia that are felt, mined, and re-circulated across writing, performance, and community engagement.

Reading for atmospheres

> Drip, drop, drip, drop … the water created a melodic rhythm. The peaceful atmosphere soon disturbed by reality. The narrow hallway was an entrance to hell. Click, clack, click, clack … the rail aggressively ran, like tall heavy soldiers marching to war, progressively, growing louder as time slowly passed … Dim orbs of light flickering around, afraid of the devouring darkness, slowly suffocating us all … The absorbing darkness hooked me further. Gushing through my veins. Luring me deeper into the mines … (J1.)

J1.'s story enacts atmosphere as a physical force: the darkness, the rhythm of rails, the suffocating air, circulate around, and into the veins of the narrator. The tension, rhythm, and bodily confinement of the space stick to the senses and thicken into a lived intensity. I begin with J1.'s story because it sets a tone. Of the fifteen texts submitted to my project in Merthyr Tydfil, twelve were set in mines (the other three included a burnt out city, a biological testing unit, and a warzone). On first reading the overrepresentation of mines in the future narratives surprised me. I knew

the history and geography would influence what the students wrote about the future of their town. I did not expect the students to figuratively re-open the mines in most of their stories. I have completed this project in four other geographies, and none of them had such a singular engagement with location as emerged from this school. The English teachers explained that they had not instructed the students to set their dystopian futures in mines, yet the students did. In a former mining town, the prevailing setting for speculative dystopian fictions about the future was a re-opened mine.

My analytic approach to reading is literary rather than sociological. I read for mood, genre, geography, and history, and trace how tone and imagery register the affective weather in the students' writing. Below, I draw on theoretical companions who are attuned to atmosphere, narrative, and geography; their scholarship surfaces as I move through the students' texts.

> The city that was now a wasteland used to be a place of rare beauty and iridescent colour … and the smell of freshly baked cookies filled the air. Now the deathly trails of smoke and gas choked the atmosphere. (M.)

M.'s. retrospective narration grammatically recounts events that are already concluded – but her insertion of 'now' disrupts the story's linearity. Like many speculative fictions, it speaks from *after* the devastation, as if the imagined future were already history. This kind of writing performs an affective residue: the future is felt as loss before it even arrives.

The stories' atmospheres – suffocating yet punctured by fleeting glimmers of other moods – recall what Williams (1977) calls *structures of feeling*: the emergent, lived organisation of experience through which a time and place are felt before they are codified in ideology. While Williams developed the term as a general analytic, I'm mostly interested in how he located its specificity geographically. Writing from the same region as the students – the Valleys of South Wales – in his essay *The Welsh Industrial Novel* (1979) Williams describes a 'specifically Welsh structure of feeling' (11) bound to industrial work and valley life, where geography is constitutive of experience rather than its backdrop. He traced a 'pervasive sense of defeat' (12) after the failed 1926 General Strike, while also acknowledging fleeting glimpses of light and renewal. This doubleness – defeat and illumination – resonates in the students' dystopian texts:

> Running through the factory a glimmer of childhood shone through my pupils. This is where I spent the great time of my youth … Suddenly my brain wakes and I realize. Everything that once was is gone … (C.)

Reading Williams alongside the students' writings requires care. Despite writing from the same geographic region, Williams was analysing novels from another era, whereas the students' pieces are shorter, fragmentary impressions written in 2023. They are all deliberately dystopian, and continually return to atmospheric toxicity, class, and control structures as lived conditions within their texts:

> Because of all the gases produced in the mines we have to wear gas masks and if we can afford it, we can also get a fire-resistant suit in case any machinery lights the gases on fire. At the Office of Civilian Affairs, I grabbed 2 new charcoal filters and my rations for the next 3 days. 'Chicken Flavoured Rations' read the bag. After the takeover all food is considered rations. (R.)

In addition to being structured as dystopias that seem to be influenced by their readings of the genre, many of the students' narratives also evoke literary nostalgias reminiscent of the English Romantics. Romantic poets idealised youth and pre-industrial landscapes and mourned lost pastoral innocence:

> … My job is to sit there and repeatedly open and close a single door all day for people coming through with their coal carts. (T.)

Later in T.'s narrative, the child is beaten for eating a cracker, attempts to flee the mine, but is caught and executed by the overseers. While Romantic tropes of childhood innocence are visible in the students' writing, they are precarious, unsettled by the oppressive conditions that the children in the stories rarely escape. Historically, children did work in the mines of the Valleys, performing

tasks small children could manage, like opening the doors inside the mines. These moments in the students' writing reflect the material realities of their locale, but also the literary traditions and classroom pedagogies through which they have encountered and reworked such histories – continuing a conversation with Williams on how local geographies, histories, and moods shape what can be imagined and written about place.

Building on Williams' attention to local geographies and moods, contemporary sociologist Vanke (2023) extends this approach to post-industrial Russian towns, showing how structures of feeling take form sensorially, imaginatively, and practically. In reading student writings, I foreground the imaginative: their fictions appear to activate and redistribute inherited atmospheres rather than merely reflect them, producing new affective landscapes across bodies, more-than-human characters, and their future-present town. This imbrication is evident in O.'s story, where a character's body mutates after contact with mine-derived agents:

> In an instant, tentacles began to sprout from his back like mushrooms, ripping through the hazmat suit like it wasn't there. (O.)

In O.'s story, a townsman named Floyd is slowly transformed by the mine's toxicity; his body sprouts alien growths and he turns on his friends. Such metamorphoses recur throughout the students' writing, where the mine becomes less a setting than a condition of being – a mode of existence that seeps into bodies, relations, and ways of sensing the world.

> It's dark. Everything is dark. The rough, cold stone walls hold us hostage. The coal that surrounds us, embedded in the walls, begging to be set free. How is it possible to relate to a sad piece of coal? (E.)

E.'s story gestures beyond the human-centric relations. The protagonist's seemingly rhetorical question – 'How is it possible to relate to a sad piece of coal?' – does more than anthropomorphise an object; it asks what kinds of relations become possible in a landscape shaped by extraction. In this context, the coal's sadness is not a projection of human feeling but a geological residue – the accumulated pressure of histories that continue to press on the present. By staging a relation between coal and the protagonist, E.'s story blurs the edges of the human and the nonhuman: what counts as a life, whose pain can be recognised, and how narrative participates in drawing or unsettling those boundaries.

Thinking further with E.'s question, *How is it possible to relate to a sad piece of coal?* calls for an analytic that attends to material histories without collapsing them into metaphor. Below, I turn to literary theorist Sylvia Wynter, whose work on genres of the human illuminates how narrative practices order who and what matters. I then engage Kathryn Yusoff's critical geography scholarship which traces how extractive logics organise both geological and social relations.

Wynter's work on literature and narrative (1971) and genres of the human (2003) has shaped my research in literary classrooms (Truman 2019b, 2023). Wynter argues that what we call 'the human' is not fixed but organised through narrative genres. In the modern West, one genre dominates: *Man*, the Western, white, bourgeois figure positioned as the universal standard (Wynter 2003). This matters because every story either sustains or unsettles these genres. For Wynter, humans are *homo narrans* – storying beings – so writing is never neutral. Writing otherwise challenges the dominance of *Man* and opens possibilities for other ways of being human (Wynter and McKittrick 2015).

Wynter's claim that writing can unsettle dominant genres raises the question of what narrative inheritances enable or constrain such possibilities for these students. In the post-industrial, predominantly white working-class South Wales Valleys, the racialized hierarchies Wynter critiques in her genres of *Man* are not reproduced in their colonial form, yet humanist grammars persist, shaping the boundaries of humanness and belonging.[6] The students' speculative fictions – taught and written within the discipline of English[7] – are entangled in those grammars. Their dystopian writing inherits both the literary genre of dystopia and the deeper genre of *Man* that subtends it, which

together shape how suffering and disposability are imagined in their futures. These grammars appear most starkly where the students' fictions narrate labour and punishment:

> Inside the town the townspeople had it worse. They were forced to work in the mine and those who did not want to were sent to Fort Gurnwah Prison. (J2.)

J2.'s depiction of forced labour and incarceration stages Wynter's claim that narrative genres materially allocate life.[8] In the students' writing, this allocation persists in matter itself: the mine, the coal, and the town aren't backdrops but living archives where story and geology fold into one another – a relation Clark and Yusoff call *geosocial* – meaning the entanglement of geological and social formations or how extractive histories sediment into both land and life (Clark 2017; Yusoff 2017). Yusoff's later work traces this geosocial logic forward, showing how in regions where extractive labour is exhausted, the mine's logics reappear in the form of incarceration (2021). J2.'s story literalises this continuity: mining labour and punishment make up the architecture of the town.

The mine as an organising structure recurs across the students' fictions, but in L.'s story its logics work more subtly. The mine has reopened, but it is also a command, a place-name, and – when read aloud – a question.

> It was a dark, gloomy day in DESTINATION–MINE–Y. When suddenly my phone glitched out and the news appeared! It read; "You have all been sent an email with a number … If the number you have been emailed appears on your screen, then you have been selected to work in the now reopened mine. I was terrified because they were about to call the last number! Finally, it said '63.' I was relieved, but that feeling didn't last. My best friend Henry texted me—he was number 63. I could smell the sadness of everyone in DESTINATION–MINE–Y." (L.)

The punning name *DESTINATION–MINE–Y* layers command (*mine!*), location (*the mine*), and inquiry (*why?*). Through this naming, extraction occupies both geography and grammar. Later, the story enacts this logic: Henry, the character sent to the reopened mine, is transformed by it and his body becomes crystallized half-human, half-mineral.

> He had one green eye, but his other one was just a hole of darkness, a black hole … one of his arms was just a bunch of crystals. (L.)

Yusoff's (2018) work has traced how extractive histories are stratified into both the earth and human bodies: rock coal, gold, and oil move as the bloodlines (Yusoff 2015) of modernity. In South Wales, these same grammars shape industry, relation, and feeling and link local life to global circuits of extraction. Where L.'s narrative above figured extraction as incorporation, J2.'s story pushes this logic to its limit:

> There is a cannibal in an abandoned mine. No-one knows what it looks like because no-one has made it out alive. (J2.)

In this horrific fragment, the mine becomes a site where humans feed on each other. Rather than the earth consuming its diggers, a no-longer-person, turned monstrous from its conditions, devours others. The story enacts the systemic violence Wynter and Yusoff describe: a world that reproduces itself by consuming lives has begun to consume itself. The cannibal isn't separate from the mine; it is the exhausted mine's logical extension.

In the students' stories, extraction is not just history but atmosphere: a condition through which social and bodily life continues in their town.[9] Some characters live the mine's violence directly, while others inhabit what Yusoff describes as the afterlives of extraction (2024). E.'s story, which began with the rhetorical question about relating to coal, translates these logics into a classed context:

> As I walk at a swift pace towards the edge of the forest, overlooking the town where I once lived, a thought jumps to mind. Why were we locked in caves? An answer plasters the face of my beloved Merthyr. Modern buildings full of life and greenery cover what used to be our little town. It all clicks. Did they, whoever 'they' are, lock what they assumed were 'poor' people in the caves so they could make Merthyr their paradise? (E.)

Although set in the future, the story critiques historical and contemporary socio-economic divides. The protagonist escapes the underground only to discover that poverty dictated their confinement, showing how extraction's grammars continue to structure social hierarchies and material conditions in the story's speculative town.

Reading across these narratives, the mine emerges as a system where histories (and futures) of labour, coal, and grief circulate within the same affective network. They show how extractive histories can linger in the collective imagination of place and shape what can be felt and told. In this sense, the students' speculative fictions do more than *represent* a post-industrial landscape: they *compose* within it. Their writing participates in the same atmospheres it describes, tracing the afterlife of extraction through tone, imagery, and mood. The mine is not just inherited terrain but an active, atmospheric infrastructure that organises relations between bodies, stories, and futurity. These affective afterlives surfaced in fiction, and they also surfaced in the students' conversations that I attend to in the following section.

Focus groups

I conducted focus groups with twelve of the students that submitted stories. The focus groups took place during lunch hour in the English classrooms in summer term 2023. Our discussions explored the students' narratives and creative processes, alongside questions related to my broader research on geographically specific youth futures. Below is an excerpt from one focus group that resonated with the atmospheres I identified in their narratives. Students' statements and my questions have been lightly edited for readability and names are pseudonyms.

> Anything else that comes to mind when you think of the future? ~ Researcher
>
> Under water. ~ Peter
>
> Forgotten. ~ Huw
>
> What do you mean about under water? ~ Researcher
>
> We'll be turned into a reservoir. A flooded village like the others. ~ Peter
>
> They've flooded others? ~ Researcher
>
> Pontsticill. The church is underwater. You can still see the church under water.
>
> And they've done other villages. ~ Rhain
>
> Here in Wales? ~ Researcher
>
> Capel Celyn. They flooded the village. To make reservoirs. For England. ~ Rhain

Pontsticill is a reservoir established in the 1920s that serves the students' region and at low water the old church is still visible. Capel Celyn in north Wales was deliberately flooded in the 1960s to supply water to the Wirral and Liverpool. While the element is different – water rather than coal – the same extractive and uneven relationship between Wales and England persists and shapes the students' perceptions of their town and its future.

Although the literal flooding of their valley seemed unlikely, the idea carried historical gravity. The proposition that such a thing could happen created an atmosphere in the focus group haunted by what had happened to small towns in their country before. In Peter's phrasing, 'We'll be turned into a reservoir,' he speaks as the town itself. The students expressed an affinity with Capel Celyn – even though it was drowned half a century ago and far to the north –revealing how past relations with England continue to shape their imaginaries of place and futurity.

As the conversation continued, the students' concerns extended beyond literal submergence to another form of erasure:

Okay, so there's the fear of being flooded. What did you mean by being forgotten? ~ Researcher

The new road coming in. ~ Huw

A road from where? ~ Researcher

Head of the Valleys. Runs from Swansea to England. ~ Skye

A motorway? What's your concern about it? ~ Researcher

We'll be a place that's passed through. Not like a village anymore. ~ Huw

How does that make you feel? ~ Researcher

You don't want to be just a place that's a highway buzzing through you. ~ Huw

In his phrasing, 'a highway buzzing through you,' Huw – like Peter – identifies *as* the town itself, experiencing place as something porous and vulnerable to marginalisation from outside forces. The new road, like the reservoirs that once submerged Welsh villages, threatens to reconfigure the students' town as a place bypassed rather than inhabited.

In their words, infrastructural change didn't sound like progress, but dispossession rehearsed under a new name. Their discussions in the focus group resonate with what Berlant (2010) calls 'cruel optimism' – a mode of anticipatory affect in which attachments to hopeful promises paradoxically maintain the conditions they aim to resolve. In this case, cruel optimism manifests in being told that new infrastructures (reservoirs, highways, industry) will *revive* the town, when the students are aware that such developments may continue to reproduce the Valleys' marginal status in relation to England and the larger Welsh cities.

As Gordon (2008) argues, unresolved historical injustices can press upon and *haunt* the present, influencing how the future is imagined. The students' discussion of the new Head of the Valleys highway was not about collapse but about being rendered peripheral within broader social or economic networks. Their concerns about being forgotten or flooded are both figurative and actual, articulating the afterlives that contour their sense of place and futurity. What stood out most, though, was how deeply they felt for their town – its valleys, its histories, and their own imagined futures. That attachment, neither nostalgic nor naïve, surfaced again later in the community showcase, where their stories and performances made that care unmistakable.

Community affects and mining-nostalgias

The students' stories and focus group discussions revealed how the residues of mining life shape their sense of place and futurity. I now turn to the Evening Showcase – where these affective and material traces circulated socially and collectively – and what I theorise as mining-nostalgias.

In the second year of the project, I returned to the school as part of an Evening Showcase event for parents, staff, and community members. The two English teachers and I, with help from students, set up the school auditorium for the event. Students printed out and pasted their speculative stories on colourful cardboard; teachers displayed resources outlining my research project and the prompts the students had followed. On the front of the stage and side walls we hung the poster-sized paintings the students had created in art class to illustrate their stories – these were extremely well rendered dystopian scenes with the students' full names and story titles on them like novel covers. Above the stage, someone projected black-and-white image of the Aberfan disaster.

In the weeks leading up to the Showcase, the English teachers had invited the Welsh and Drama teachers to participate with performances and poetry recitation. The auditorium was packed. Teachers said it was the best turnout for an event since COVID-19. In the first part of the evening, everyone mingled, ate, read the student writings, and looked at the artwork. Then, several students read excerpts from their writings aloud, followed by a poem recitation in Welsh. The finale, led by the drama teacher, was a poetic reenactment of the Aberfan disaster with classroom chairs

representing the spoil tip sliding down the mountainside and burying a primary school not far from the students' own school in 1966. The performance moved the audience and me to tears. As I lingered in the auditorium with teachers, students, and community members – surrounded by mining's past and dystopian futures – the atmosphere was palpably nostalgic. I do not claim to share the students' local inheritances, but to have been affected by the atmosphere that held us collectively in that moment.

Trying to describe that collective feeling risks sentimentality but affect theory gives some vocabulary to articulate what I sensed. Brennan (2004) describes walking into a room and feeling its 'atmosphere': '[t]he transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The 'atmosphere' or the environment literally gets into the individual' (1). Similarly, Walkerdine's (2016, 2010) ethnographic work in South Wales demonstrates how intensities attach across generations, shaping embodied experience and communal life in post-industrial settings. Brennan's account shows how atmosphere might enter an individual in, and for, an instant, while Walkerdine embeds affect into genealogy – both registers illuminate how nostalgia might circulate between bodies rather than belonging to any one of them. This was how that nostalgic feeling felt in the Evening Showcase: the students' storytelling and performances revealed that they both inherit and rework the industrial and cultural histories of their region.

Nostalgia is slippery to define. The word derives from Greek *nostos*, meaning returning home, and *algos*, meaning pain. It is often tied to youth as a sense of personal loss or as an inherited attachment to other people's memories of a better past (Threadgold 2020). Boym (2002) distinguishes between restorative nostalgia, which seeks to reconstruct an idealised past, and reflective nostalgia, which lingers in longing and uncertainty. Each of these framings describes the textures of longing that circulated at the Evening Showcase between inherited grief and speculative care. The Welsh term *hiraeth*[10] (often translated as homesickness for a place that may never have existed) offers a geographically grounded inflection of the feeling. *Hiraeth* does not describe a desire to return, but the recognition that return is impossible. These layered affects were not abstract; they were felt in the room as students performed their stories, poetry, and historical reenactments.

While *hiraeth* embeds nostalgia in the specificity of Wales, Fisher's (2012) notion of *hauntology* extends these place-based affects into a broader cultural condition, where nostalgia becomes a symptom of capitalism's foreclosure on futurity. In late capitalism, Fisher argues, cultural production recycles fragments of the past, producing what he calls 'the slow cancellation of the future' (Fisher 2014, 13). Although I draw on Fisher here to help describe these moods, I don't suggest that in the students' stories and performances, this foreclosure was total. Their speculative fictions don't just reproduce fragments of a lost industrial past; they also extract and recompose affective materials in order to imagine otherwise. Both *hiraeth* and hauntology articulate attachments to absences – what no longer exists or perhaps never did – but *hiraeth* remains anchored in the specifics of place, while hauntology describes a broader cultural and temporal impasse.

These frameworks help make sense of what the students were already doing intuitively in their speculative writing: folding memory into futurity. Extending this line of thought, and drawing on the literary and geophilosophers discussed earlier, I use the term *mining-nostalgias* (as noun and verb) to describe how these layered affects persist in the students' writing, performance, and conversations. I emphasise the verb aspect; the students are not just passive recipients of these nostalgias, they *mine* them.[11]

This recursive movement – backward and forward at once – characterises much of the students' work, where futurity and memory continually fold into each other. J3.'s story *Martyr Tydfil* exemplifies the students' sophisticated, recursive awareness and reworking of industrial nostalgias. *Martyr Tydfil* is set in 2001, after a virus has wiped out everyone in Wales. In the story, the only survivors move into an 'abandoned' castle, which they name 'Cyfarthfa Castle' and discuss a nearby mine that they name 'Ironworks.'

The story plays with time and place and is embedded in real-life geographies. Cyfarthfa Ironworks was once a major mining operation in the region, and Cyfarthfa Castle already existed

with that name. Additionally, J3. names the town in the story 'Martyr Tydfil:' the historical name the students' town Merthyr Tydfil.

J3.'s story rewrites the past only to return to these historical names, intertwining the real industrial heritage with dystopian futurity (set in the past!) This time-bending, geographic rewriting can be read as an instance in which nostalgia functions not only as passive inheritance but as an affective resource (Shannon and Truman 2026).

Spectral legacies and writing different futures

By asking students to locate their speculative fictions in the geography and histories of Merthyr Tydfil, the project foregrounded place as both a material and imaginative agent in their writing. The students' dystopias and focus group discussions reveal how nostalgias and mining's afterlives haunt and shape their sense of place and frame anxieties about both the past and the future. The students demonstrated that they were skilled at both enacting these nostalgias in story, poetry, and art, and speculating beyond them – which is the promise of speculative thinking as not just diagnostic of the present, but as a method to lure other possibilities (Crawley 2020; Truman, Shannon, and Yusoff 2023).

A.'s narrative entitled *Fuelling the Dragon* describes a dystopia where the protagonist labours away mining under the watchful gaze of a dragon, a prominent symbol for Wales:

> I'm lost. Every day I wake from my threadbare bed. Every day I struggle to pick up the huge, heavy, pickaxe that has rusted away from use. Every day, I walk down the shallow tunnel as dark and empty as space. However, this space has no sun, no stars, no moon, no planets, just black empty space. (A.)

The character toils and toils, mining coal to feed the dragon to repel invaders. Near the end of the story, after a mining accident and some discussions with newcomers who have learned Welsh, the protagonist says:

> An uncountable amount of time has passed. More mining, time seems to have no meaning. Under the omnipresent gaze of the dragon, I work until my arms become as stiff as logs and my legs buckle under the constant strain. Why do I do this everyday? Surely there is more to life than this. This perpetual loop of mining and mining and mining. Why do I do this? Do I do this just because I don't know any different?
>
> Well, that will change. I will do what I wish to do. I am going to stop mining. I will stop listening to the dragon. I will live how I wish. (A.)

Where A.'s protagonist in *Fuelling the Dragon* breaks the affective loop of extraction, L.'s narrative widens this act of refusal into collective recovery. At the end of *Destination-Mine-Y* (previously discussed) the townsfolk drill into a crystal and manage to destroy whatever component had been turning the miners into crystal-monsters. L. writes:

> We have a town to repair but this time we're not going to be watched, no, we're going to be as free as we possibly can be. But we must fix this town, we must fix Merthyr Tydfil. (L.)

The town is renamed Merthyr Tydfil, no longer a mine, and the townsfolk plan to rebuild it. In this speculative narrative act of renaming and reconstruction L's story demonstrates how the students move beyond rehearsing inherited extractive logics to imagine otherwise worlds.

This paper demonstrated how youth-authored speculative fiction can function as a research method for investigating young people's geographies and the affective atmospheres of place. As a form of research-creation, I treated the students' writings as data. In this project, speculative writing operated on multiple levels: it worked materially and socially, tracing how histories, geographies, and affects circulate within texts, and it functioned analytically, offering a method for studying young people's engagement with place that foregrounds the tension between inheritance and imagination. My reading of the students' texts, in conversation with contemporary scholarship, revealed how place-based imaginative practices can articulate the inherited atmospheres of place

and speculate beyond those conditions. While the methods used in this project are mobile, the student writings are firmly situated: in the geography explored in this paper – the South Wales Valleys – the stories demonstrate how legacies of extraction and post-industrial life are felt atmospherically and reworked in textual form. The project shows that student-authored speculative fiction can open spaces for care and alternative futures within the worlds young people inhabit and imagine.

Notes

1. The larger project (2022-2025) focused on speculative fiction as a method for thinking about the future in English classrooms in four countries: Australia, Canada, England, and Wales. The collected data from schools encompass student writings, discussions, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and focus groups with students regarding their experiences of reading and writing speculative fiction, and an online survey. Students were invited to engage with the entire study or just parts depending on their interest and guardian consent, with over 200 students taking part in some element of the study, and 70 writing speculative fiction stories that are now published in a limited-edition art book called *Future Imaginaries*.
2. I have consent publish the students' full names in a collection of their compiled writings, but they are to be anonymized in academic articles.
3. Although the mine closed in 2023 there are attempts to re-open it https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yrr1y6klpo.
4. This was the only school in my larger project who specifically focused on dystopian fictions. Others focused on science fiction, and one deliberately didn't mention dystopias at all in teaching. The entire classes completed the speculative fiction writing as part of their classwork. Only those students who wanted to submit to my project completed consent forms and submitted their work. Full consent was obtained for fifteen students (7 boys and 8 girls), in Merthyr Tydfil.
5. https://literaryeducationlab.org/wp-content/uploads/Situated-Speculations_Truman.pdf.
6. *Man* is inseparable from racial capitalism even when race is not foregrounded phenomenologically.
7. English *is* a colonial language in Wales, although according to the school website 95% of the school's students speak English as a first language.
8. Where Wynter locates the paradigm of extraction in plantation capitalism which she also links to the history of the novel (Wynter 1971), Yusoff grounds it in the mine (Yusoff 2021).
9. Yusoff's research (2018, 2024) largely grounded in U.S. and global contexts, traces how epistemic and material practices of sorting and extracting value from matter and life (deciding who and what count as matter and life) co-constitute racialisation. These extractive logics continue in the South Wales Valleys, though they are expressed less more through class than through race.
10. Thank you to Vivienne Kuh at Bristol University, and the English teachers at the school in the Valleys for discussions around this Welsh word. I'm not a Welsh speaker but I've lived in Wales for 18 months in the past and have come across the term many times. Doing this project, I begin to understand the concept more.
11. While in the broader project (across Australia, Canada, and England) not all student fictions were dystopian, those that were often deployed nostalgic narration. Characters reminisced about a 'better' past before descending into catastrophe. In the Merthyr Tydfil cohort, this nostalgia took on a distinct form, inflected by recurring imagery of mines and mining.

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