The Gentrification of Cheryl Lavery in Fiona Mozley's *Hot Stew* (2021)

Imogen Dobson

Abstract:

This paper explores the physical and intrapersonal transformation of the character Cheryl Lavery in Fiona Mozley's Hot Stew (2021). This paper examines Cheryl's transformation from a social outcast to an ideal citizen, just as her neighbourhood, Soho, transforms from a hotbed of diversity and culture into another gentrified and homogenised area of London. At the beginning of the novel, Cheryl is a homeless drug-addict and sex worker who obediently follows her pimp as they sojourn the streets. One day she enters a crater in a construction site and ventures underground. As an earthquake hits Soho (after which it becomes gentrified), Cheryl emerges supposedly free of her drug addiction. This paper uses an agential realist approach to analyse the complexities of Cheryl's intersectional identity formation and transformation. It will also draw upon studies on underground spaces, as Soho displays transformative abilities that contribute to Cheryl's development into an epitome of capitalist ideals. Finally, this paper investigates the significance and consequences of Cheryl's transformation, as well as the liminality and potentiality of space. In particular, it questions whether Cheryl's transformation was worthwhile, and whether she is better off for it. While she was lucky enough to survive the earthquake (as many of the other vagrants did not), she seems unhuman, almost as if she was indoctrinated in the bunker and transformed into an exploited cog in the capitalist machine of Soho.

Keywords: Gentrification, sex work, the subterranean, marginalisation.

Introducing Fiona Mozley and *Hot Stew*

This paper explores the intersectional identity formation and transformation of the character Cheryl Lavery in Fiona Mozley's *Hot Stew* (2021). As a homeless drug addict and sex worker, Cheryl is socially and spatially marginalised to the underground areas of Soho. She has formed a holistic relationship with these subterranean conduits and as a result, her mind and body take on its topographical attributes. Eventually, the land's ambiguous powers regenerate her into a respectable member of society, reflecting events above the surface, where the neighbourhood becomes gentrified. This paper questions whether these transformations are beneficial, as Cheryl emerges obsessed with work and capitalist ideals, while Soho loses its diversity and eclectic individuality.

Before turning to the critical frameworks that inform this argument, I will draw a brief sketch of the plot and its socio-political background to ensure the reader is familiar with the text. *Hot Stew* is the second novel by English author Fiona Mozley and is set in Soho – a district in the West End of London. The novel's labyrinthine narrative follows a sprawling cast of characters that are either closely or loosely connected to a crumbling townhouse which comprises of squatters under the townhouse, a French restaurant on ground level, and a 'walk-up', or brothel, above. The squatters are led by the Archbishop, a narcissistic and delusional old man who believes he is a deity that has occupied Soho since its creation. One of his followers is sex worker and drug addict Cheryl Lavery. She and her pimp, Kevin Metcalfe, perform defective magic tricks for money, and are playfully known by the other residents of Soho as Paul Daniels and Debbie McGee (popular British television magicians from the eighties).

Impoverished sex workers like Cheryl move in complex spaces and this experience is inherently *intersectional*. This term functions as an analytic tool to help understand the multifaceted matrices of oppression that impact power dynamics within the human experience. This is expressed by sociologists Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge: 'when it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other'.[1] *Hot Stew* offers a narrative that presents the complex axes of Cheryl's victimisation in an oppressive system. For instance, as a sex worker,

[1] Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Polity Press, 2016), 16.

she inhabits stigmatised social and legal circles. The novel is set in the twenty-first century, suggesting that partial criminalisation is enforced in England. These laws legalise the act of engaging in sex as a transaction, but related activities, such as soliciting in a public place, owning or managing a brothel, and pimping and pandering, are illegal.[2] This has adverse consequences for sex workers like Cheryl, who must work in high-risk locations with dangerous clients to avoid the police. Cheryl's damaging experiences as a sex worker are compounded by classism and poverty as well as misogynistic and pharisaic religious attitudes towards women.

Like other inhabitants of Soho, Cheryl's lifestyle is threatened by stony-hearted businesswoman Agatha Howard and her plans to blank-slate and gentrify the neighbourhood. The gentrification process is defined by social geographer Helen Jarvis as 'the superior purchasing power of one social and economic class [that] overwhelms and displaces another […] [such as] the upgrading of run-down vintage property and the proliferation of coffee shops, wine bars and pricey independent boutiques.'[3] This process affects the inhabitants as well as the establishments, as the sex workers and other working-class people are priced out and forced to leave their homes. This is illustrated through gastronomical metaphors, which is fitting as Soho was historically an area for elites to hunt game, and it remains an epicentre for food in London today. The most destructive consumer is the sinkhole (triggered by the earthquake) that swallows Soho's buildings, including the townhouse. This devouring is not unlike the process of gentrification, which, like a mouth, swallows the original buildings and regurgitates them into lesser versions, or shadows, of their previous form. Furthermore, the title of the novel is a homonym that evokes this elision between the city and food. Moreover, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) clarifies that stews were another name for brothels during the Tudor era. The title also further consolidates the metaphor of food, stews are a mixture of different foodstuffs, representing Soho's diverse community.[4] In this stew everyone consumes and is consumed, as is observed in the motif of snails in the novel, which are a delicacy in the French restaurant but also eat and destroy plants in the brothel's rooftop garden.[5]

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[2] Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London: Verso, 2020), 87.
[3] Helen Jarvis, Paula Kantor and Jonathan Cloke, *Cities and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2009), 40.
[4] "Stew," Oxford English Dictionary, accessed September 29, 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/stew_n2?tab=meaning_and_use.
[5] Fiona Mozley, *Hot Stew* (London: John Murray), 6.

One day, Cheryl wanders underground, accessed via construction sites where authorities are currently building a new tube line. She stays for a few months in an unknown wealthy Londoner's underground bunker. By the end of the novel, Cheryl emerges during the earthquake as ostensibly transformed. She is no longer an addict and is ready to be a productive member of society. However, there is something machinelike and inhumane about her. Mozley considers Soho to be the 'heart and soul of London', and the novel, along with Cheryl, are reminders to readers not only of the downtrodden outcasts routinely ignored and unaided in society, but also of the rich history and diversity London can lose to gentrification and homogenisation.[6]

Critical Frameworks

This paper uses an agential realist approach to analyse the complexities of identity and intersectionality within the novel. The space of Soho reflects the marginalisation of Cheryl and demonstrates transformative abilities that manifest in her transition into an embodiment of capitalist ideals. Philosopher Karen Barad's text, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), is a useful framework for capturing both the aliveness of space and intersectional social inequalities. Her study emphasises the inseparability and interconnectedness of gender, class, and space, 'advocating instead [for] a relationality between specific material (re)configurings of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted'.[7] In other words, everything is entangled, and as a result, 'bodies […] are not simply situated in, or located in, particular environments. Rather, "environments" and "bodies" are intra-actively co-constituted'.[8] Barad's neologism, 'intra-action', is the intermingling of people and things. It differs from 'interaction', which implies things are separate before a relationship is enacted. In contrast, 'intra-action' comes from within, and individuals emerge from it. These ideas are useful in understanding Cheryl's close relationship with Soho's underground spaces.

While Barad's work is multidisciplinary, it remains grounded in scientific origins: 'physics tells us that edges or boundaries are not determinate either ontologically or visually'.[9] Therefore, it would be suitable to draw upon feminist theorist Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), which provides a more anthropological reflection of space and

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[6] Fiona Mozley and Betsy Gleick, "Hot Stew: An Evening with Fiona Mozley and her editor, Betsy Gleick," posted April 29, 2021, by Books & Books, YouTube, https://youtu.be/63RUM68p3gM?si=TneF4TU-BO5F_2Dp.

[7] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 139.

[8] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 170.

[9] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 156.

human relations. This text is a close reading of how everyday lived emotions endow bodies with value and align them with powerful ideologies. Ahmed explores hate in both space and discourse, and clarifies that 'it is the regulation of bodies in space through the uneven distribution of fear which allows spaces to become territories, claimed as rights by some bodies and not others.'[10] That is to say, bodies like Cheryl's are feared or hated, and spatially marginalised as a result.

Finally, historian Peter Ackroyd's *London Under* (2011) is beneficial in understanding the historical precedents and subterranean representation in *Hot Stew*. Studies that focus on gentrification and homogenisation, like social geographers Helen Jarvis, Paula Kantor and Jonathan Cloke's *Cities and Gender* (2009), also help provide historical, geographical, and anthropological context to the outcome of Cheryl's transformation. Having offered a rounded approach that considers intra-actions of space and the emotional world of transformation, this paper will begin its analysis of Cheryl's spatial-emotional development.

Cheryl as a *persona non grata*

This section will explore how Cheryl is a *persona non grata* within Soho due to her intersectional identity as an impoverished addict and sex worker. It will also investigate how this informs the space she inhabits, such as the underground crack den, the local pub, and the construction site. Analysing the stark differences between her physical and intrapersonal self at the beginning and end of the novel will help to fully grasp the implications of Cheryl's transformation.

Cheryl is constructed as an outcast from society because of her intersectional identity. Firstly, she is a homeless drug addict. While readers do not see her using heroin, her compromised health is evoked in her physiognomy, particularly imagery of her as a corpse. She has cadaverous bones that are 'dried and fractured' and skin that is 'withered'.[11] She hardly speaks and seems to be in a continual state of apathy, as 'there was also a period of her life when nothing but heroin made her happy or sad […] that time also passed'.[12] Secondly, while it is never explicitly stated that Cheryl is trading sex for heroin, it is heavily implied to be a part of her vagrant lifestyle, as a policewoman confirms that 'she has been convicted for shoplifting, public indecency and solicitation'.[13] Generally, the practice is pilloried, and this is

[10] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 70.
[11] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 15.
[12] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 13.
[13] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 97.

exacerbated by the UK's current legal policy of partial criminalisation. While the sex workers in the brothel do share a community, Cheryl is isolated even from them. Sex work activists Molly Smith and Juno Mac stress that 'sex workers who use drugs are subject to the criminalisation of both drugs and prostitution [...] [this] creates even more risk of police attention and a criminal record, it also makes them illicit and therefore dangerous'.[14] Thus, Cheryl's lifestyle and employment status is socially and legally stigmatised, emphasising her outsider identity.

Impoverished and eager to avoid the police, Cheryl is forced to inhabit marginalised areas of Soho. Her deteriorating body is reflected in the dark, underground environments she is drawn to, echoing Barad's claim of the intra-active, co-constitution of bodies and environments. Her rotting body is aligned with the crumbling entrance to the Soho brothel, which is 'dark [...] damp [...] [and] rusted', as she lives underground, like a buried dead body.[15] Ahmed suggests that 'fear works to contain bodies within social space through the way it shrinks the body, or constitutes the bodily surface through an expectant withdrawal from a world that might yet present itself as dangerous'.[16] Due to social stigma, Cheryl's body and mind is effectively shrinking, as is evidenced through physical and mental decay. Her relegation to the forgotten, hidden areas of the city also points to her withdrawal from the world.

Specifically, Cheryl becomes so accustomed to the Archbishop's dark, damp cellar that she takes on attributes of its subterranean topography. This aligns with Ahmed's observation that 'bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others'.[17] Like the insects that surround her, Cheryl 'creeps' and 'crawls' around the small cellar, and listens to the earth on all fours 'like a half-spider', as if she has become one of the many insects scuttling below earth.[18] Even when she leaves the cellar, 'she keeps to the sides of the pavements where the tall buildings cast shade', like an underground creature demonstrating her preference for the dark.[19] This dehumanising language reflects society's hatred towards Cheryl, as Ahmed continues, 'the association between the roach and […] the body works powerfully […] [it] becomes an object of hate through "taking on" the qualities already attached to the roach: dirty,

[14] Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 94.
[15] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 136.
[16] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 70.
[17] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 1.
[18] Mozley, *Hot Stew,* 53, 37.
[19] Mozley, *Hot Stew,* 16.

contaminating, evil.'[20] The cockroach, like the other insects Cheryl is depicted as, spatially and socially demarcates her to a literal and figurative periphery.

Alternatively, the semantic field of insects points to Cheryl's strong connection with Soho. Insects, like 'woodlice[,] dwell in the cracks between the bricks of the cellar wall', and since a pub-regular describes Cheryl as having cracks in her skin, perhaps she is less an insect and more the underground walls that these creatures scuttle about in.[21] This demonstrates an ambiguous reciprocity with the earth, intensified by her detection of the impending earthquake's tremors before anyone else: she feels the vibrations 'catch [...] unsettle [....] quiver' in all parts of her body.[22] This suggests that Cheryl is more acquainted with the land than the rest of the vagrants who live underground.

Despite this close relationship with the underground, it is the Archbishop, and not Cheryl, who functions as its figurehead. The underground may seek out a ruler as it is a spatial locus of power. Ackroyd reflected on Greek and Egyptian mythology and suggested that 'the further downward you travel, the closer you come to the power', because most ancient religions created temples and shrines underground.[23] This historical precedent intensifies the Archbishop's claims to be a spiritual leader, particularly as he is called the 'Archbishop', or a religious leader, his home is described as an 'archdiocese' or group of churches, and his vagrant followers are referred to as a 'flock', or worshippers of Christianity.[24] He also believes himself a monarch, as he dons purple, or the colour of royalty, and his crack den is referred to as an 'underground palace'.[25] This is ironic, as he preaches to addicts sat slumped on 'rancid mattresses or on the hard floors', surrounded by 'syringes [that] lie around in degrees of decay'.[26] Furthermore, Cheryl is ostracised even within marginalised spaces. The Archbishop rarely pays her attention and Kevin barely listens to her, remarking, 'I wouldn't listen to this mad cow'.[27] Just like Soho, which is controlled by the middle and upper-class elites, the underground is also in the grip of a dominant authority.

While Cheryl rarely strays from the underground crack den, she does occasionally venture into the local pub with Kevin. Many of Mozley's characters frequent the establishment,

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[20] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 54.
[21] Mozley, *Hot Stew,* 88.
[22] Mozley, *Hot Stew,* 37.
[23] Peter Ackroyd, *London Under* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2011), 3.
[24] Mozley, *Hot Stew,* 57, 54.
[25] Mozley, *Hot Stew,* 54.
[26] Mozley, *Hot Stew,* 53.
[27] Mozley, *Hot Stew,* 57.

including the sex workers from the brothel. It has a traditional appearance that bears the signs of its old age: a brown colour palette, posters 'advertising defunct breweries', a 'fitted carpet, happily threadbare', and 'cracked paint of the exterior walls'.[28] The adjective 'happily' connotes that the pub and its regulars appreciate its elderly appearance and quirky charm, even though, like Cheryl, it is suffering from physical deterioration. Additionally, even Kevin and Cheryl are not completely excluded here. When a tourist belittles the pair, a regular defends them, conveying that although they are social pariahs, they are preferred over the entitled and wealthier outsiders.[29]

The final space Cheryl visits prior to her transformation, with the rest of the Archbishop's followers, is the construction site. They scavenge near underground conduits, where Cheryl finds a golden crown, hinting at the land's approval of her. The crown catches her foot, and when she holds it up near a floodlight to see it better, it is as if a spiritual presence has marked her out as a ruler by bathing her in light. This alludes to Arthurian mythology where only Arthur can pull the sword from stone because he has been chosen as the predestined ruler. Eventually, Cheryl disappears under the construction site. Despite sharing similar qualities with the subterranean, it is not clear why Cheryl chooses to leave the Archbishop. She tells a pub regular that the Archbishop sent his followers out searching for tremors and 'they've gone home, but I've stayed'.[30] If she is continuing to search for the tremors, it is unknown what purpose she gains by locating them. Perhaps the tremors are the voice of the underground, calling her to the bunker, intensifying this development of the subterranean as the agent of Cheryl's transformation away from a *persona non grata*.

The Transformation of Cheryl

This section will analyse the transformation of both Cheryl and the underground that surrounds her. When she descends into a crater on a construction site, she locates a luxury doomsday bunker that the one percent use to escape disasters. Unlike the Archbishop's crack den, it is a natural sanctuary. Transgressing the social expectations of the space, as it is intended to be used by unknown members of the elite, Cheryl lives there for six months, weaning herself off heroin and learning to be a knowledgeable and productive member of Soho.

[28] Mozley, *Hot Stew,* 290.
[29] Mozley, *Hot Stew,* 13.
[30] Mozley, *Hot Stew,* 88.

Cheryl's descent into the underground can be viewed as a *katabasis*. In classical mythology, it is a descent into the underworld, or, as defined by Haewon Hwang, a 'meta-narrative of descent that dominated images of heroic journeys [and] embraced eschatological themes of death, redemption and renewal'.[31] Cheryl's storyline evokes similar beats as she emerges from the underground a revived woman. When reflecting on Cheryl's descent, Mozley uses allusions to the Greek underworld as she remarks, 'I was thinking of Persephone a little bit', or the Greek Goddess abducted by Hades, king of the underworld.[32] Subterranean London has been likened to the Greek underworld, as a traveller, cited by Ackroyd, described the Tube line in 1960 as 'like crossing the Styx [...] The fog had followed us down from the streets and swirled above the discoloured and strongly smelling river like the stream of Hades'.[33] The Styx is the river that separates the Earth from the underworld, thus implying that the London Tube is the gateway to this underworld, and, like Charon's boat, is used for ferrying the dead across the Styx. To get to the bunker, Cheryl does not use the Tube, but she does use the tunnels where authorities intend to build a new Tube line. Like Ackroyd's traveller, Cheryl finds the experience damp as 'she drank the water that dripped', and foul-smelling from the 'rotting timbers'.[34] Therefore, her journey underground follows a literary tradition of heroes like Aeneas and Odysseus descending into the dark and infernal underworld. When they leave, these heroes generally obtain a quasi-divine status, not unlike Cheryl's own rise of social importance.

Once inside the bunker, expectations of the underground are subverted as the space functions as a welcoming sanctuary for Cheryl. Historian Rosalind Williams observes that traditionally, 'the defining characteristic of the subterranean environment is the exclusion of nature – of biological diversity, of seasons, of plants, of the sun and the stars', or an inorganic environment devoid of wildlife.[35] But due to modern technology, the bunker becomes 'an underground eco-system, a subterranean oasis, a chlorine and halogen haven, a garden with walls' – with nouns 'oasis' and 'haven' connoting safety and refuge.[36] There are also tropical plants heated by UV lamps, pictures of beach fronts, and loudspeakers hidden in the plants that

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[31] Haewon Hwang, *London's Underground Spaces: Representing the Victorian City, 1840-1915* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 1.
[32] Fiona Mozley and Arianna Rebolini, "Fiona Mozley on Hot Stew with Arianna Rebolini," posted May 20, 2021, by The Center for Fiction, YouTube, https://youtu.be/5nUL8DUPjc8?si=aw0YMTNKRQBAOUAv.
[33] Ackroyd, *London Under*, 80-81.
[34] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 193.
[35] Rosalind H. Williams, *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 20.
[36] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 194.

simulate noises from the rainforest.[37] Cheryl becomes accustomed to light here, whereas before she favoured darkness. When she enters the bunker, it is described as 'a fevered Hollywood dream, a Kodachrome test-strip',[38] with the turquoise waters and vibrant plants creating an explosion of 'pinks, yellows, lilacs, reds'.[39] The underground space has been transformed, as if Cheryl has located a quasi-rainforest amongst a cold and dark English city.

The bunker also subverts the typical conception of the Greek underworld, as Cheryl is not reborn *after* she leaves, but *during* her habitation of the underground space. There is imagery of transformation, rebirth, and new beginnings, encapsulated by the chapter title 'Debbie McGee Redux', with 'redux' defined in the *OED* as 'brought back, restored'.[40] Natural metaphors reflect Cheryl's rebirth, as there are 'flowers as large as a baby's cradle', reminding the reader of birth and innocence, and, when Cheryl sleeps, she is described as having 'cocooned herself' in linen sheets, like a caterpillar that has gone into hibernation but will emerge as a butterfly.[41] Butterflies are typically lauded as beautiful whereas caterpillars are not, suggesting Cheryl is on her way to becoming more accepted by society. Furthermore, the archetypal vertical metaphor is subverted as Ahmed claims 'lowness becomes associated with lower regions of the body'.[42] Cheryl may be a sex worker, which aligns her with a 'lowness', but in this underground, she is no longer practicing and manifests as a *tabula rasa*.

Cheryl's transformation, with its connotations of innocence and rebirth, is emphasised by continual mythical allusions. For instance, the abundance of nature may remind the reader of an Edenic paradise, intensified when Cheryl takes her clothes off and is naked like Eve before the Fall. This alludes to Christian mythology's *tabula rasa* state of humanity before sin. Furthermore, considering the references to Greek mythology, the swimming pool could be inferred as one of the underworld's rivers. For instance, the river Lethe causes the dead to forget their earthly existence. However, when Cheryl swims in the pool, she recalls her childhood swimming lessons, along with the 'armbands and earplugs and swimming caps and Lucozade and KitKat afterwards'.[43] Instead of facing forgetfulness and oblivion, the listing and lack of punctuation gives the impression that Cheryl is suddenly awash with childhood

[37] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 194.
[38] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 194.
[39] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 194.
[40] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 193; "Redux," Oxford English Dictionary, accessed September 29, 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/redux_adj?tab=meaning_and_use.
[41] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 194, 195.
[42] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* 89.
[43] Mozley, *Hot Stew*,195.

memories, as if her former, childlike self is returning. Where the underworld is meant for the dead, Cheryl finds herself reborn into a natural, youthful state untouched by drugs and suffering.

Cheryl's body and mind are cleansed and healed in the bunker, echoing Barad's claim that 'bodies are not objects with inherent boundaries and properties' and are capable of change.[44] For the first few weeks in this quasi-rehab, Cheryl is sick as the drugs are flushed out of her system, but, once she is better, she works at improving herself. She uses the sauna every day, where she 'scraped dirt from her pores […] rinsing off, drying herself and coating her body with shea butter'.[45] The adjective 'coating' makes it seem as if Cheryl is covering herself with a new skin without the cuts and bruises of her drug-riddled past, acquiring a new flesh that is not corpse-white but can 'recess then bounce up and back into place'.[46] This suggests that her flesh before was stiff and inflexible, like that of a dead body in rigor mortis, but now she has been reanimated into someone that spatially belongs above ground with the rest of the society.

Cheryl then re-educates herself with books and films that focus on land ownership and community. She watches classic films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939) in the small theatre room, which unbeknownst to her, was her father's favourite film. This is important because one of the themes of the film is property ownership: 'land, it's the only thing that matters'.[47] Her father was also a landowner: 'he ran more brothels, and strip clubs, and underground gay bars, and he became achingly, blindingly rich'.[48] Thus, not only is the underground triggering Cheryl's growing respect for Soho, but it is also reacquainting her with the drive for profit and ownership that her father held. Moreover, it is through self-help books that 'she learnt about being a productive member of society. She learnt how to be 'happy' or to be a hard-working, model citizen.[49] Perhaps the film and the books are less broad education tools and more propaganda. Her isolation in the bunker has probably exacerbated her susceptibility to this indoctrination, which results less in her empowerment and more her being possessed or instrumentalised by the underground.

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[44] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 139.
[45] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 196.
[46] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 196.
[47] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 196.
[48] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 100.
[49] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 100.

While Soho's ambiguous powers have transformed Cheryl physically and mentally, the space should not be reduced to a quasi-drug rehab. It teaches her about land, profit, and the illusionary capitalist promise of a dream, and has consequently moulded her into an idealised, one-dimensional citizen. This paper will now move on to discuss the consequences of this transformation, as once Cheryl has exhausted everything in the bunker, or been indoctrinated, she bids goodbye to the plants and ascends back to Soho during the earthquake.

The Impacts of Cheryl's Transformation

Just as Soho loses its diversity and charm, becoming a homogenised, bourgeoise neighbourhood, Cheryl emerges from the bunker reborn as a gentrified version of herself. A social worker has been assigned to help her; she shares a flat with a roommate; and she holds a job butchering in a restaurant where she is working her way up to an official qualification. Cheryl has 'cleaned' her life up as well as her body, and now leads a socially productive and ideal existence. However, this section will explore how this transformation is not without issues, as echoed by Mozley, who suggested that she 'wanted us [her readers] to question whether she's [Cheryl] better or worse off after the experience'.[50]

After the earthquake, Soho's businesses are gentrified. The beloved French restaurant is swallowed by the sinkhole, but there were plans to tear it down before anyway, as expressed by Agatha: 'restaurants like this are quaint, but they aren't profitable'.[51] The buildings that did survive are completely redeveloped, like the local pub. It is made 'stylish and joyless', as its traditional appearance and old inhabitants are eradicated.[52] A former regular feels 'sad, kind of hollow' when he visits, reflecting the pub's unrecognisably empty appearance with its 'motivational slogans, weird puns, fake antique advertising posters to replace the real antique posters'.[53] This regular no longer feels welcome here, while others no longer visit either because they died during the earthquake or because they moved away from the area, like the sex workers that lived in the brothel.

Sex workers were Agatha's main target in redeveloping Soho, but Cheryl escaped this suppression by conforming to the gentrification process. Jarvis clarifies that the 'labelling of the street prostitute as "other" and a threat to the reimagined metropolis […] [causes them] to

[50] Mozley and Rebolini, "Fiona Mozley on Hot Stew."
[51] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 9.
[52] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 290.
[53] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 290.

be physically removed from gentrifying neighbourhoods'.[54] Cheryl was also once this 'other', but now she functions as a spiritual champion of Soho's gentrification. When she emerges from the bunker she is 'illuminated from behind […] her skin is bright and shining', affirming that the power of the underground, like a God, has miraculously healed her.[55] Her voice is also described as 'unexpectedly ethereal' and her laugh reverberates from the depths of the ground itself –'hahahahaha up from the belly of the city', as if Soho has infiltrated her body.[56] Cheryl is not just an ideal citizen, but a personification of Soho's gentrification. This emphasises that the process has not only shaped homogenised buildings that could exist in any other city in the UK, but also homogenised people.

Cheryl's mind, specifically, has been gentrified. She is hyper-productive to the point that it alarms her colleagues, and work dominates conversation with her roommate.[57] It is as if she was indoctrinated while in the bunker as her transformation into a hard-working member of society is abrupt and quixotic. Her metamorphosis into a robotic, capitalism-driven worker could be reminiscent of Morlocks from H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895): exploited workers who became increasingly brutalised as their labour became more mechanised and repetitive. Likewise, she has no personality outside of her drive for profit. The Morlocks also live and work underground, and if Cheryl is likened to them, it can be implied that she has brought a subterranean influence with her above the surface. Additionally, the Morlocks are cannibals who feed on the innocent, empowering Cheryl and aligning her with the sinkhole and the ensuing gentrification that has hungrily consumed the original buildings and occupants.

Cheryl operates as an extension of Soho, and the ambiguous potential and limits of the underground space are observed within her. She was once decaying and deteriorating but, after the earthquake, is reformed into something shiny, clean, and obsessed with profit. Evidently, her life has improved drastically in both safety and health, but her mechanistic personality has left her a one-dimensional figure.

Conclusion

Mozley's novel draws attention to Soho and its practises of marginalisation. As a result of social and legal stigma, Cheryl is initially spatially marginalised to subterranean Soho. However, the underground is subverted from a dark and claustrophobic space into a locus of

[54] Jarvis, Kantor, and Cloke, *Cities and Gender*, 230.
[55] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 284.
[56] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 310, 311.
[57] Mozley, *Hot Stew*, 293-294.

change and refuge. This echoes Ackroyd's claim that the subterranean can function as 'the home of the devil and of holy water' – it does not possess singular connotations.[58] In the underground bunker, Cheryl locates the latter in the form of an Edenic natural world. Due to her empathetic understanding of the earth, as she predicts the earthquake and is often depicted with its topographical attributes, Soho appears to favour her. Williams suggested that 'the earth's inner space may no longer be regarded as sacred, but it still is a repository of spiritual value', and, in *Hot Stew*, Soho's ambiguous eschatological powers protect Cheryl.[59] Williams also suggests that some descents are a 'journey [that] is intended as a temporary episode of moral education, not as a permanent self-exile', and, while in the bunker, the underground frees Cheryl of her drug addiction and improves her physical and mental health.[60]

As Cheryl transforms, so does Soho, confirming Barad's elision of the body and environment, as 'there is much more to the question of where a body ends than meets the eye'.[61] Embodying the ambiguous Soho townhouse that is buried and resurrected as another luxury building in a homogenous neighbourhood, the once crumbling Cheryl emerges gentrified and obsessed with work and profit. It remains ambiguous whether Cheryl's life has improved. On the one hand, she is better off – healthy and drug-free in a safe home with secure employment. However, this comes at a price, as she is no longer Debbie McGee or Cheryl Lavery, but a slave to the subterranean with no other desires except to work. In a reflection of Ahmed's observation that 'the economy of fear works to contain the bodies of others', Cheryl can only belong in Soho, gentrified or not, if she is completely purified and redeemed of peripheral intersectional identities like drug addict, homeless person, and sex worker.[62]

[58] Ackroyd, *London Under*, 182.
[59] Williams, *Notes on the Underground*, 24.
[60] Williams, *Notes on the Underground*, 182.
[61] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 156.
[62] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 67.

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