

Creative writing PhD proposal:

‘A working woman’s topography: working class female poets’ responses to land and labour in England 1730-1789’ and ‘Gig’

Synopsis

The creative component will be a poetry collection, provisionally titled ‘Gig’: approximately 40 topographical poems. Following interviews and work shadowing, many poems will represent labour, both sited and unsited, and articulate discourses of labour.

The critical component will be a study of working-class women’s topographical representations of labour in eighteenth-century poetry. My PhD aims to recover these neglected poets as part of mainstream literary history; but also to examine their literary choices as an identity group.

The creative and critical components of my PhD are fully integrated on themes of labour and land; the creative component highlighting the legacy of the eighteenth-century.

Creative Component

Title: ‘Gig’

Context

My collection will build on the works of cultural-geographer poets such as Alice Oswald, Karen Solie, Jean Sprackland and Peter Riley.

I am inspired by the Georgic poets’ enthusiasm for the prosaic. I will rise to their challenge and write poetry about Uber drivers and road re-surfacing. Contemporary topographical poetry is often written from the leisured perspective of a walker or naturalist.¹ My collection will engage, not just with idealised dry-stone wallers and poachers, but unsited software engineers and telesales executives. I will articulate contradictory discourses on work – how it can support or destroy our health.²

I am interested in how labour forms a place. In Calderdale, the legacy of eighteenth-century transport infrastructure and enclosure is still apparent.³ This is in our physical environment and in how enclosure changed labour and the relationship to land - shaping concepts of

¹ Ben Smith, ‘Singing at the Right Pace: The Songlines of Alice Oswald and Thomas A. Clark’, *PN Review*, 38.5 (2012), 50-52,83.

² Callum Cant, *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019). Sarah Kessler, *Gigged: The Gig Economy, the End of the Job and the Future of Work* (London: Random House Business Books, 2019).

³ p99-104, Bernard Jennings, *Pennine Valley: A History of Upper Calderdale* (Hebden Bridge: Hebden Bridge Local History Society, 2011).

ownership, responsibility and landscape aesthetics.⁴ Eighteenth-century growth of unsecure wage-labour echoes our gig-economy.⁵ Continuity *and* discontinuity can be seen in job titles, e.g. pinder, vlogger.

Creative content

Poems will include: a late-night taxi driver; a swimming-pool maintenance person and where the water comes from; the workers who put causey-stones in but have no headstones themselves. The poems will be very varied in tone and form; using dramatic monologue and found poetry e.g. from Calderdale Local Collection.

The collection will be deepened by intertextuality. Using an innovative layout, I will include found text, both modern and historical, to be read *alongside* the poems, throwing them into relief.

Methodology, reach and impact

Community engagement is integral to the creative component. After desk-based research into labour discourses, e.g. public health, I shall interview and work-shadow white and blue collar workers. I will give readings at local poetry nights, which I already attend, allowing a two-way conversation with my subjects. I will seek advice from the ethics committee to ensure subjects are treated ethically, e.g. combining and anonymising interviewees.

Critical Component

Title: ‘A working woman’s topography: working class female poets’ responses to land and labour in England 1730-1789’

Context, impact and reach

Since Lonsdale’s anthology of women poets in 1989, academics such as Landry, Milne, Backshreider, Ingrassia, Fairer, Ferguson and Christmas, have firmly re-placed female poets in this period of literary history. Yet, thirty years on, their poetry remains under-studied. Very few women poets have their own scholarly editions; and of the working-class poets, only Mary Leapor has been accorded this attention, in 2003.⁶ As Landry writes: “No sooner had the question ‘Were there any?’ been answered by Roger Lonsdale’s ground-breaking anthology[...]when sceptics enquired ‘Were they any good?’ ”⁷ My PhD will build on the work of pioneers in the field of women’s, and working-class, literary history. I am part of the second wave of scholarship that sees these previously excluded poets, not as novelties or anomalies, but a neglected part of literary history, worthy of critical interest.

The poetry of the eighteenth-century reflects socio-economic changes of enclosure, early industrialisation and war-time nationalism. Poetry’s treatment of land and labour moved from the country-house poem, to the Georgic, touching on the Rococo and Graveyard

⁴ p208-13, Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth-Century*, The Penguin Social History of Britain, Rev. ed (London, England; Penguin Books, 1990). p37-64, Rachel Crawford, *Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape, 1700-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵ Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth-Century*.

⁶ Greene, Richard and Messenger, Ann, *The Works of Mary Leapor*, Oxford English Texts (Oxford: University Press, 2003).

⁷ p535, Donna Landry, “‘But Were They Any Good?’: Milkmaids on Parnassus, or, Political Aesthetics”, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 38.3 (2005), 535–38.

schools, to preromanticism and the picturesque.⁸ The English georgic dominated the first half of the century and much critical work has been done on these poems (e.g. Waldrop, Loar, Goodridge). The georgic, with 'masculine' themes of labour and agriculture, appears to be male dominated.

The dearth of criticism for working-class female poets means I will make a significant original contribution to this young, growing field. And examining labour in topographical context, in relation to these poets, means I will break new ground.

Research content and methodology

The two research questions are: what is working-class female poets' contribution to the shifting treatment of labour and land through the mid-late century; particularly, their response to the male-dominated English georgic? Secondly, does treating these poets as a group reveal insights about their treatment of topographical labour?

This study aims, not to look at a poet(s) complete output, but to more accurately place and read a group of poets within literary historical context. Readings of key poems will include Ann Yearsley *Clifton Hall*; Mary Leapor, *Crumble Hall*; Mary Collier, *The Women's Labour*; Susanna Blamire *Stocklewath or the Cumbrian Village*; Ellen Taylor, *Written on a Barrow-side when Sent to Wash Linen*; Jane Cave, *A Petulant Kitchen Maid*.-

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⁸ p311 and p325 and p712 Alex Preminger, *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton University Press, 1974).

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