



Standard Application form for students applying for a +2 or +3 studentship in the Arts and Humanities

(September 2023 entry)

1. Studentship applied for (please tick):

- 2 years FT/ 4 years PT funding (for those who have already started a PhD programme)
- 3 years FT/ 6 years PT funding

2. Named studentships you wish to be considered for (see guidance for details):

- Global Majority studentship
- Philosophy Pathway studentship for female Global Majority candidates
- Broken Pipeline studentship (UK only)

3. Candidate's details:

Name:	
Application / Registration number:	
Address:	
Town:	
Postcode:	
Country:	
Telephone:	
Email address:	



Nationality/Resident Status:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UK or Irish National <input type="checkbox"/> UK Settled status <input type="checkbox"/> EU National not resident in the UK <input type="checkbox"/> EU National resident in the UK for the past three years <input type="checkbox"/> Other
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4. Project details:

Mode of Attendance a. Full time b. Part time

Project title:	The 'Confrontational Escapism' of the New Weird: Reading Challenging Fiction in Online Spaces
Pathway:	English Literature
Institution:	University of Liverpool

5. PhD Proposal:

5a) Please describe the proposed research (**up to 1500 words**). The word limit includes bibliography or references, tables, figures, table/figure captions and footnotes. Please include a word count.

In 2013, China Miéville, one of the most well-known pioneers of the New Weird movement in literature, declared that 'those who are made monsters are those who the elite make into the outsiders, those who are traduced and slandered as devil figures' (2013). For Miéville, to stand with the monstrous is to stand 'with the monstrous and monstrous-made figures throughout literature and history, because the disavowed [...] have always had the sneaking sympathy of those suspicious of power' (Ibid.). My project argues that Miéville's genre tackles this enmonstering 'the disavowed' are subject to, through a process a fellow writer in this field, Thomas Ligotti (2003: 23), calls 'confrontational escapism'. Ligotti defines this process as when readers confront a reality by which they are oppressed through 'escap[ing] into a sort of imaginary hell' (Ibid). Tim Lanzendör's Marxist analysis of the New Weird echoes this logic, too, when arguing that 'Weird' literature—his catch-all term for the New Weird—re-emerged at 'the concrete moment of economic crisis', drawing a parallel between crisis and the need to engage with challenging fiction that confronts this said crisis (2021: 74). As Benjamin Noys and Timothy S Murphy reveal, New Weird addresses many crises with its '*promising monsters*' that challenge 'new racisms, misogynies,' as well as 'class violence' (2016: 126). But what use is this imaginary hell to people trapped and made monstrous by racial, class, or gender discrimination, what does New Weird provide in its invocations of horrific realities? Employing Marxist, feminist, and critical race theories, I will develop a framework through which to understand 'confrontational escapism' and how New Weird's use of it challenges oppressive realities; I will also examine how readers are responding to the imaginary hells of New Weird literature, and why, as will be observed, this increase in engagement with the New Weird has taken place in online spaces such as Discord and Goodreads.



The project will be split into two parts. The first will be a textual examination of how New Weird utilises confrontational escapism, and the second will be a qualitative investigation into why New Weird attracts readers, both in online reading communities and in reviews. During the first eighteen months of this project, I will establish the logic of 'confrontational escapism' through the analysis of New Weird authors Thomas Ligotti, China Miéville, Octavia Butler, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Kathe Koja, and Victor LaValle, all of whom engage with varying intersectional concerns like class, race, and gender violence. Utilising the Science Fiction Foundation Collection at the University of Liverpool, I will also illustrate how the New Weird relies on subverting 'Old' Weird's tendency towards these prejudices (most prominently in its foremost author, H. P. Lovecraft). Victor LaValle's *Ballad of Black Tom* (2016) exemplifies this subversion perfectly. When reworking one of Lovecraft's most vile and racist stories, LaValle's New Weird horror stems from the very real 'malice' of racist police officers who kill Black Tom's father, instead of Lovecraft's privileged and typical 'fear of cosmic indifference [that] seemed comical, or downright naïve' in comparison (2016: 41). The ensuing apocalypse of Cthulhu's rise at the novel's end invites readers to savour the destruction of this white hegemony that allows this systemic 'malice' to exist, for in an imagined hell, an imagined end to that hell can be envisioned.

This critical engagement with New Weird texts in Part 1 of my project will inform the empirical study of Part 2, where I examine how and why readers are attracted to the New Weird considering its invocation of imaginary hells; why they are engaging with this fiction in an online space; and whether or not they engage more with that fiction when reading it alone or within a community. This focus on the online space stems from a recent rise in online communities. The horror book club 'HOWL society' has grown to over 2,078 members in its Discord server, and while this may be attributed to pandemic digitisation, the very recently created Tenebrous Press Discord server (a New Weird publisher now cultivating a book-reading and story-writing community) has reached 254 members since December 2022. This phenomenon coincides with a burgeoning research interest in the importance of literary reading to mental health and its value in providing access to new modes of thinking and reflection that improves states of mind and wellbeing (for example, Oatley, 2007; Green 2020: 178; 112). During the pandemic, the value of reading was also recognised in the practice of social prescription, which seeks to 'offer a holistic mode of support that is bespoke—tailored to individual need' (Boydell, 2020: 42). Clinical psychologist Professor Neil Frude even advocated for bibliotherapy to support those needing psychological therapy given that 'sadly, only a small minority – between 10% and 20% – ever receive such help' (2021). It is important to investigate this increase in New Weird readership, then, to understand the reasons individuals have for engaging with difficult fiction in online spaces, illuminating the paradox of why readers would engage with the imaginary hells of New Weird fiction, even during a pandemic.

To investigate, I will collect data on engagement with New Weird writing within these communities in two key ways. Utilising my experiences in data collection and analysis as part of the LivCare team investigating the benefits of arts and culture on mental health, I will first follow Emmet's and Driscoll's method (2019) for examining Goodreads reviews and collect and then perform a thematic



analysis of the data. Second, I will collect primary data by inviting (up to eight) participants from a Discord reading group to take part of in-depth individual (online) interviews about their experiences in a group. I will analyse this data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) because of its literary-philosophical foundation in phenomenology and its successful application in reading and mental health studies (Gray, E. et al., 2016). I will be supported in this work by the cross-Faculty and interdisciplinary Centre for Health, Medical and Environmental Humanities (in particular its Arts and Mental Health theme) and the English Department-based Literature and Mental Health Cluster and the Centre for New and International Writing, research groupings my supervisory team are closely involved with.

While New Weird is an increasingly popular field of interest in literary research, my project will not be solely a discussion of the genre's advancements of philosophy and critical theory; it will also examine how readers respond to them. To focus on communities online is to mirror New Weird's genesis, too, as Jeff VanderMeer reveals that 'M. John Harrison started a message board thread with the words: "The New Weird. Who Does it? What is it? Is it even anything?"' (VanderMeer, 2008: ix). Unlike Weird fiction's origins — the racist Lovecraft locked in his study, casting aspersions on all of modernity with little essays — the New Weird is a creature of the contemporary online space, built innately on community, on message-board forums that pose intersectional questions and challenges to a literary canon rife with white hegemony, patriarchy, and class structure. My project keeps with this emancipatory ethos. It synthesises critical reading and empirical study to illustrate not only the advancements that New Weird fiction has made in the critiques of marginalising, enmonstering realities, but the impact New Weird's confrontational escapism has had on its readers within progressively more populated online communities.

References

- Boydell, K. M., 'The Art of Social Prescription', *Beyond the Psychology Industry: How Else Might We Heal?* (Gewerbetrasse: Springer, 2020)
- Frude, Neil, *Reading Well and Bibliotherapy in Wales*, online video recording, YouTube, 5th February 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiqotttRu-8&t=2s>> [accessed 20th January 2023]
- Gray, Ellie, et. al, 'Making Sense of Mental Health Difficulties through Live Reading: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Experience of Being in a Reader Group', *Arts & Health*, 8.3 (2016), 248–61 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2015.1121883>>
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VanderMeer, Jeff, 'Origins', in *The New Weird*, eds. by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, (San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2008)

WeAreManyMedia, *China Miéville: Marxism and Halloween – Socialism 2013*, online video recording, YouTube, October 20th 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paCqiY1jwqc>> [accessed 15th May 2022]

5b) Please provide information on how the proposed research engages with issues relating to Equality, Diversity, Inclusion, and Sustainability (max 100 words)

My project investigates the benefits of New Weird's challenging of the realities of racism, classism, and gender violence. My choices of New Weird writers purposefully represent an intersection of oppressed communities, from the Marxist fictions of China Miéville to the nonbinary explorations of Caitlin R. Kiernan and the race-and-sex informed narratives of Octavia E. Butler. I am not only arguing that this genre wants to help its readers through invocations of difficult topics, I am also investigating through an empirical study the reasons for and the thoughts readers have when engaging with a genre evoking challenging realities.

6. Qualifications, professional/ practical experience

Year awarded	Qualification type	Qualification Subject	Awarding institution	Class or GPA
2022	MA	English Literature	University of Liverpool	First
2021	BA (Hons)	English	University of Liverpool	First



My first research position was with [REDACTED] on his project about John McGahern. I was tasked with transcribing his interviews with McGahern's closest family and friends, and publishers with whom he worked, as well as researching archival materials for first reviews of McGahern's publications. This position taught me the values of archival research and primary data when examining an author and/or subject.

In my MA I was chosen to work with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] on their 'The arts and mental health wellbeing' project. I learned how to gather social media data and collate it on Excel, and how to perform a discourse and thematic analysis of that data. Because of my performance, I was asked to join the LivCare team as a research associate during my MA studies. Here I conducted interviews with our partner arts and cultural organisations about how they delivered their services online to their often-vulnerable beneficiaries. After transcribing these interviews, I used Nvivo to create our themes and created a codebook that would involve our social media data. All this research is being published in an article.

I was also added to the SHARED team, a project working in conjunction with other institutions to promote best practice in arts- and humanities-based approaches to mental health. Here I have been researching and working with these arts organisations to present their works in narratives and 'talking heads', and I will be presenting at workshops to display this research to our partner organisations and institutions while mediating discussion between everyone.

Aside from my academic experience, I am also an author of fiction in the New Weird. Two examples of my pro-rated payments are, 'One More', a critique of how capitalism preys on addicts with betting offices that have cosmic stakes, and 'Der Zedernwald', an ecogothic examination of how we commoditise entities that are very much alive (like trees). Because of my successes with these stories, the magazine that published me, Cosmic Horror Monthly, asked me to be a first reader to help look for new and innovative (New) Weird horror.

Description of professional/practical experience (max 350 words):

7. Supervision

Please propose the supervisory team for your project:

Institution	Supervisor
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University of Liverpool	[REDACTED]
University of Liverpool	[REDACTED]

8. Research Training and resource needs (max 150 words for this section)

Please give details of the anticipated research training needed for your PhD project, including difficult language training. Please give details of the kind of resources you will potentially need during your PhD. Please also indicate whether your research project will require you to undertake research abroad.

The Liverpool Doctoral College will help me in a number of areas. Using the university's Science Fiction archive, I can be trained and have my skills improved in using archival materials. To improve my skills as a future academic, I can attend workshops that aim to replicate the aims of VITAE, where I will learn how to teach and lecture during my project. To improve my skills as a researcher I will also be attending more workshops, seminars, and conferences with the support of the Centre for Health, Medical and Environmental Humanities, as my aim in both my project and my career is to examine the benefits literature can have on mental health. The Centre for New and International Writing will also help me engage with writers of the New Weird and help improve my research abilities when conducting interviews with them.

9. Collaboration with External Partners (max 150 words for this section)

Please give details of any potential collaboration you will develop with external organisations during your PhD programme (industry, cultural organisation, government bodies etc) including possible placements.

N/A

10. References / Transcripts

- Your institution will need to attach two references and your transcript(s) from your programme application to this application form.

11. Acknowledgement

I confirm that the information I have provided in this form is complete and accurate to the best of my knowledge at this date. I fully understand that it is my responsibility to ensure that the relevant forms are submitted to the relevant office in due time and that any missing information may render my application incomplete and ineligible. I authorise the North West Consortium DTP to disclose to the AHRC any information that is relevant to my application.

Signature: (Type Name if submitted electronically)	
Date:	25/01/2023

