University of Warwick
Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies

Example PhD Research Proposals

1. ‘An Examination of Devotional Domestic Space in Late Medieval English Literature’

The landscape of medieval devotional literature is replete with spatial and architectural imagery. The significance of these faith-bolstering metaphors, in writing intended for an audience of anchoresses and enclosed nuns, has recently been explored in such illuminating volumes as *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourses of Enclosure* (2008), edited by Liz Herbert McAvoy, and McAvoy’s 2011 book, *Medieval Anchoritisms: Gender, Space and the Solitary Life*. This recent critical interest in the significance of the intersection of space and gender in medieval religious writing for women has generally focused on a handful of key texts, with Ancrene Wisse in particular receiving particularly close attention. The *Doctrine of the Hert*, a fifteenth-century Middle English translation of a devotional thirteenth-century Latin text, *De doctrina cordis*, has been largely overlooked in the critical discussion of the spatial imagery and allegory of medieval religious literature. This is, I believe, most unfortunate, as The *Doctrine* is a text filled with fascinating spatial metaphor, with the imagery of the household, the kitchen and domestic household labour recurring throughout the pages of the text. A more sustained engagement with the imagery of household space and domesticity in the *Doctrine* will add to the current critical discussion around spatial and architectural imagery in devotional literature of the Middle Ages, as well as casting further light on a text that has generally evaded scholarly attention.

Key to my research will be to build on the few critical works that have examined the household imagery of the *Doctrine* in greater depth. “Domesticity and Medieval Devotional Literature”, a 2005 article by Batt, Renevey, and Whitehead, provides a useful springboard for examining the configuration of household space in the *Doctrine*. Renevey, in this article, usefully notes that the household crafted in the *Doctrine* is one which “… emphasises space as a social construction, a place of exchange and interaction”. Renevey’s observation suggests a need to interrogate the Doctrine’s presentation of household space further, as it appears distinct from the implication within other devotional texts that spatial imagery implies fixity and impenetrability.

Closer engagement with the Doctrine will also invite the comparison of its presentation of domesticity with that of other devotional texts of the period. The domestic imagery of the second book of the Middle English translation of Bridget of Sweden’s *Liber celestis*, for example, will make an interesting companion to that of the *Doctrine*, with the domesticity of the Liber a means through which the text’s author is able to articulate visionary ideas. *Sawles Warde*, too, an earlier Middle English allegory of devotional domesticity, will offer a useful point from which to chart any ways in which authorial use of the trope of the household alters over time. This research across a spectrum
of medieval devotional domesticity will be usefully underpinned by Vincent Gillespie’s essay, “Meat, Metaphor and Mysticism: Cooking the Books in The Doctrine of the Hert”. Gillespie’s drawing on the writing of Henri Lefebvre, on the representation and practice of space, will provide crucial theoretical grounding to the project.

My previous work on medieval religious writing will underpin the project. My undergraduate dissertation focused on intersections of space and gender in Ancrene Wisse, The Wooing of Our Lord, and Sawles Warde. My Masters dissertation, which I am currently in the process of researching, will examine the representation of marriage and the household in the Doctrine and Sawles Warde. In addition to my work in this area, I am currently taking valuable classes in palaeography and manuscript transcription, which will feed into my future research.

To conduct this research at Warwick would be an invaluable opportunity to work alongside Christiania Whitehead, whose background as the co-editor of the modern edition of the Doctrine (2010), as well as the volume of companion essays (2010), will contribute significantly to the success of the project. Furthermore, her 2003 book on medieval architectural allegory, Castles of the Mind, has had a great impact on my thinking around conceptualisations of space in devotional literature of the Middle Ages. More generally, the activities of the ‘Medievalists at Warwick’ research group, in particular, Sarah Wood’s research into religious allegory, will provide me with additional stimulation, support and expertise.
2. ““Science is fashionable now”: the dialogue between the developing field of parasitology and British literary culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’

The working title of my thesis is ““Science is fashionable now”: the dialogue between the developing field of parasitology and British literary culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and concerns the culturally constructed figure of the parasite as a symbol informed by both scientific and literary discourse.

In her article, ‘From Parasitology to Parapsychology: Parasites in Nineteenth Century Science and Literature’ (2005), Anne-Julia Zweirlein reviews a variety of scientific and literary discourse including writing by Charles Darwin, T. Spencer Cobbold, and T. H. Huxley as well as George Eliot and Bram Stoker. She looks at the figure of the parasite as a phenomenon ‘increasingly psychologised and interiorised in the late nineteenth century’, but considers the area as a relatively ‘unmapped country’ in terms of relations to contemporaneous parasitology. By analysing the interface of multiple discourses on parasitism I will map the progression of the field from the mid-nineteenth into the early twentieth century when the foundation of the journal Parasitology by Prof. George H. F. Nuttal F.R.S. in 1908 (as a supplement to the Journal of Hygiene) drew together strands of protozoology, helminthology and entomology to form a new discipline. The ‘fashionable’ acquisition of science is often constructed from and overlaps with non-scientific discourse and so has immediate everyday currency. How can these discourses inform us about the history of parasitology? I will draw together Susan Sontag’s work on illness as metaphor and Charles Rosenberg’s work on framing disease to highlight the parasite as an historically framed signifier for social anxiety, in addition to a very real biological threat. In order to access this psychological response to parasitism, I will examine the work of H. G. Wells, in addition to Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897), Arthur Conan Doyle’s The Parasite (1894), and short stories by Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad. These literary texts cast the figure of the parasite in a variety of lights; from blood lust to mind control, the parasite certainly had a vibrant literary legacy. How much is this figure constructed from scientific reality?

In Darwin’s seminal publication On the origin of species (1859) he grants the parasite an unstable identity. Whilst Darwin writes about the beauty of the ‘humble’ parasite: ‘the humblest parasite which clings to the hairs of the quadruped […] we see beautiful adaptations everywhere,’ he seems disapproving at the destruction of the parasitoid wasps, which ‘feed within the live bodies of caterpillars’ or ‘feloniously’ exploit the resources of others. Darwin describes those who only adopt parasitic instincts and cannot decide if these organisms are ‘abhorrent to our ideas of fitness’ or ‘absolutely perfect’. This uncertainty about the figure of the parasite in the nineteenth century, in part, reflects the difficulty in placing it taxonomically, a characteristic that represents rich potential for the literary author. The parasite is unique in that it is defined not by the type of organism it is, but by how it lives its life – an unusually social classification. Indeed the word parasite is derived from the Greek parasitos meaning ‘one who eats at the table of another.’ The social effects of tropical disease are discussed in travel writings such as Mary Kingsley’s Travels in West Africa (1897); she highlights not only the dangers of the foreign territory, but the specific danger to westerners, ‘no other region in the world can match West Africa for the steady kill, kill, kill that its Malaria works on white men who come under its influence.’ This serves to erect a geographical and racial distinction.

In his opening address at the London School of Tropical Medicine in 1899, Patrick Manson made a sharp distinction between bacteriology and parasitology. He argued that parasitic diseases, unlike
bacterial pathogens, were confined to tropical regions because they often required an intermediate or vector host, native to the tropics. This geographical distinction between the two [perceived] ‘types’ of disease in the nineteenth century consciously situated the parasite in a colonial environment, endowing it all the subtext of its foreign origins. The transgression of corporeal and geographical borders acts as a locus for cultural anxiety concerning the integrity of social boundaries and situates this project in the colonial period, for which the University of Warwick English department is well established. I will look at anthropomorphism and agency in scientific discourse as well as productions from popular nineteenth century periodicals and prose fiction. The empirical and symptomatic analysis of medical science does not fully account for ‘human’ – and particularly emotional – responses to disease. The psychological affect of disease is seen through literary expression and shaped by public engagement with Art. This research will highlight the importance of cultural experience in the conceptualisation of disease, and by analysing competing discourses, show that parasitic diseases affected people at all social levels and not just in a physically palpable manner. An important resource will be the London Museums of Health and Medicine, including holdings in the Wellcome Collection and the Science Museum. I will also track publishing patterns in journals such as The Lancet and the British Medical Journal and look at the pressures that led to the establishment of Parasitology as a field in its own right.
3. ‘Taking Part: The Aesthetics of Participatory Spectatorship’

I propose to investigate the emergence of the aesthetics of participatory spectatorship within modern theories of theatre and the avant-garde in order to question the political implications of what scholars have called the ‘social’ or ‘performative’ turn in modern participatory and collaborative art. In doing so, I seek to continue my significant interest and developing expertise in theories of theatre and the aesthetics of spectatorship formed during my honours thesis (2010) and current MPhil thesis (ongoing). I wish to continue this growing expertise by questioning how ideas of participatory spectatorship might be placed against neo-liberal ideologies of engagement and social participation.

Recent critical and scholarly attention has highlighted themes of participatory spectatorship in modern and contemporary theatre and performance art. Jacques Rancière’s *Emancipated Spectator* (2009) critiques western theories of spectatorship from Plato to modern theorists such as Artaud and Brecht, asserting that these theories encode assumptions of the passivity of spectatorship. Shannon Jackson’s *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (2011) examines the ‘performative turn’ in recent contemporary art, proposing the use of theatrical criticism in investigating such artworks. Art historian Claire Bishop’s *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012) examines modern participatory and performance art from the modernist avant-garde to contemporary visual art. Bishop suggests that recent attempts to counteract capitalist tendencies toward alienation and individualism through socially motivated collaborative art may in fact function symbiotically with neo-liberal ideologies of participation and engagement. More recently, Jen Harvie’s *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neo-Liberalism* (2013) continues these concerns by examining participatory art practices against the backdrop of the neo-liberal New-Labour and Conservative governments in Britain.

This recent scholarly attention demonstrates the potential for further investigation of participatory spectatorship within modern theories of theatre. I propose to examine the writings of theorists such as Georg Fuchs, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Franco Marinetti, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Guy Debord and Augusto Boal in order to question how each theorist conceptualises the ‘activity’ of ideal spectatorship. The broad historical span of these theorists would allow for chronological examination, attentive to historical and political contexts within a cultural materialist methodology. My interest is in the aesthetics of spectatorship rather than dramaturgy itself: I am concerned with the political implications of oppositions between ‘viewing’ and ‘acting,’ and how these are conceived of as producing means of political resistance.

Rancière’s formulation of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ conceptualises the interface between politics and aesthetics. This is found in the aesthetic partitioning of a shared activity and the determination of the places, times, and ways in which individuals may participate in an activity or community. This will be an important theoretical framework for examining the emergence of ideas of participatory spectatorship alongside neo-liberal ideological agendas of economic engagement and social participation. I seek to investigate whether the theatre theorists I examine offer possibilities for escaping such ideologies, and propose to question whether ideas of ‘non-participation’ can provide an alternative political understanding of spectatorship.

Warwick’s research excellence makes it an ideal institution for pursuing such a project. The English department’s research expertise in both critical and dramatic theory is of particular importance, and the possibility of auditing taught MA modules such as ‘Aesthetics and Modernity’ and ‘Marxism
and Modernity’ (given availability) is of interest to me. Furthermore, Warwick’s Centre for Arts Doctoral Research Excellence (CADRE) will be a vital facility, providing access to resources and the chance to share current research with peers, as well as the ability to attend reading groups and research training and development.

My ability to complete this project is evidenced by significant research and academic expertise, including the writing and completion of a first-class Honours thesis (16,000 words), nearly 600 hours of work as a research assistant, development of multiple original lectures, and my current MPhil thesis (40,000 words), due for completion in February 2015.
4. ‘An Ecocritical Approach to Hybridization and the Transnational Politics of Race and Labor in Minority Literatures’

My project intends to contribute to recent scholarly debates in hybridity studies, environmental justice and the connection between racial and environmental ethics and politics, and investigate how they can be productively used in reading minority literatures. Drawing on ecocritical and postcolonial theories and recent scholarship that puts Levinas’s ethics in dialogue with political, environmental and postcolonial studies, this project posits that cultural and aesthetic hybridization is deployed in minority literatures to acknowledge cultural interdependence and the mutual responsibility that it creates between dominant and minority cultures. The ethics of interdependence can also be employed to critically question racial politics and environmental justice. This project will therefore analyze the link between environmental politics, forced migration and (forced) labor, and racial discrimination. The research process will involve close readings of contemporary Native American, African American, Caribbean and Indian fictional texts in the light of a framework of postcolonial and ecocritical theory. The main goal will be to establish a transnational dialogue between the case studies, unpacking the concept of hybridization by testing it in different theoretical frameworks. This project will fill a gap in current scholarship by contributing to the recent re-theorization of hybridity, and by exploring the connections between ethics and postcolonial and environmental studies. Tying these strands together will provide a critical analysis of the transnational minority literary response to the current state of racial and environmental politics.

The objectives of this project are threefold. First, I intend to explore how environmental imperialism and the politics of (forced) labor influence racial and ethnic identity formation in multicultural societies. Secondly, I will analyze the role of hybridization as a cultural act and as an aesthetic strategy of emphasizing an ethics of interdependence. Thirdly, I will investigate the ways in which literature can bridge the ethics of interdependence with environmental ethics to produce new perspectives on ecological and racial politics. This project intends to fill a gap in current scholarship by exploring further fields of application for hybridization and the ethics of alterity in environmental and labor politics, thereby expanding the application of ecocriticism as “an avowedly political mode of analysis” that is “closely related to environmentally orientated developments in philosophy and political theory” (Garrard 2012).

This project aims at addressing the current need to re-theorize hybridity without overlooking the critique against the concept as a politically inactive mode. It is among the goals of this project to see how far hybridization can turn into a politicized form of dissent and an act of resistance against cultural isolation, passivity and stasis. Therefore, the term of preference will be “hybridization” in order to establish the concept as a deliberate and active process that facilitates the politicization of literary texts and grounds them within the rhetoric of cultural survival, therefore interpolating the term into postcolonial ecocriticism, which “fuses environmental and minority rights” (Nixon 2005). The study of hybridized aesthetics will bring insights into the use of nature and the supernatural in indigenous peoples’ cultural heritage, contributing to the exploration of the relationship between nature and human beings in these fictional texts. Hybridization can be effectively brought back into the scholarly debate when it is considered as a double-sided effort that acknowledges the interdependence between cultures. This perspective can lead to a strong link between cultural interdependence and environmental ethics.
This project is an expanded version of my RMA thesis; therefore I already have a background in hybridity studies. I plan to build on my existing knowledge on the topic and expand it into a PhD project by further exploring hybridity in conjunction with environmental justice, ethics and labor. I believe my project to be socially relevant in addressing urgent global issues, and academically relevant in following cutting-edge research trends.