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The Bristol and Bath Railway Path: An ecopoetic sound collaboration

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Since its creation in the mid-1980s as part of the first section of the National Cycle Network, the Bristol and Bath Railway Path has become a successful and accessible sustainable transport route, carrying over 2.4 million trips a year, including leisure cyclists, commuters, walkers and wheelchair users.¹ The pathway offers a fully off-road transect between the two cities, built on the remnants of a former coal rail and Midland Railway commuter line closed as part of the so-called Beeching Axe in 1968. Following advice given by Richard Beeching in two reports, *The Reshaping of British Railways* (1963) and *The Development of the Major Railway Trunk Routes* (1965), the Government extensively restructured and contracted the railway service, which involved the closure of thousands of miles of lines. The curving Bristol to Bath route which now makes up the Railway Path was closed between 1966 and 1971 (a more direct service now connects the cities), and Sustrans took over the line in 1979. Over the course of 15 miles, it passes through a range of urban and rural landscapes: it crosses the Avon multiple times as it winds towards the sea, trailing the course that connected Avon Valley industries to globalised commerce and the Transatlantic slave trade.

¹ The 2.4 million trips a year figure was compiled by Sustrans in 2007, with usage increasing at 10% a year. If it has, that would amount to 5.7 million trips a year! See John Grimshaw, '23rd January 2008 Newsletter'. *Sustrans*. https://web.archive.org/web/20110514181401/http://www.sustrans.org.uk/assets/files/general/letter_23_january.pdf. [Accessed 18.08.16]. Web. More reliable recent figures come from the Cycle Flow Census of Residents Cycling to Work 2011. This shows that in 2011 around 1,000 journeys were made each day along the BBRP from Bristol suburbs to the city centre. Around 200 users commuted from Bath to Bristol, an inflow of 462 commuters came from North Somerset and an outflow of 2,214 cyclists from South Gloucester (the greater Bristol suburban area through which the path passes). See: Office for National Statistics. 'Location of usual residence and place of work by method of travel to work'. *Nomis Web*. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/wu03uk/chart>. [Accessed 18.08.16]. Web; 'Cycle Flow with Census', *Better by Bike*. http://www.betterbybike.info/content/uploads/2015/07/Cycle-Flow-with-Census-TTW_v2.pdf [Accessed 18.08.16] Web. These figures do not take account of short journeys and leisure usage, which is bound to be higher. Sustrans estimated 6,500 trips in 2008 (see previous citation). Results of a 2016 census are due in the Autumn.

As questions of sustainability, livability, and green infrastructure now pervade a multitude of UK policy discourses, the Bristol and Bath Railway Path offers an example of how formerly heavily industrialised sites may be transformed to express inter-city sustainable transportation goals. It also provides a site for reflection on complex and contradictory constructions of place, not least because management of the path by the charity Sustrans involves conscious acts of placemaking, both through the commissioning of site-specific sculpture, and co-production art projects involving local communities.

Presented here is the outcome of a collaboration between a human geographer and sound recordist, Jonathan Prior, and a English literature scholar and poet, Samantha Walton, that takes the form of an ecopoetic sound piece, produced in response to the Bristol and Bath Railway Path. The piece combines an open-form ecopoem written both *in situ* and in response to specific sites and their entangled human and natural histories, with audio recordings produced while walking the route at various points between January and March 2016. In the collaboration, we have attempted to foreground both the sonic qualities of the human voice and those of the place itself.

Ecopoetics emerged in the late twentieth century as a distinctive theoretical, aesthetic and political approach to writing. Over the last twenty or so years, many writers have contributed definitions of the term which have been influential in its development.² We have chosen to call the piece an *ecopoem* because through it we have consciously woven environmental concern and critique with reflections on cultural, social and ecological histories of place. Collaborative and multi-media techniques help further the ecopoetic qualities of the piece. As Christopher Arigo suggests, like an ecotone, an ecopoem exists on the edges of different boundaries and practices: in our case, human geography and literary history, theories of place and innovative poetics, sound, text and performance.³

² See Jonathan Bate, (2001) *The Song of the Earth*, London: Macmillan; Jonathan Skinner, various writings in the *ecopoetics* journal and in *Jacket2*; Harriet Tarlo, (2007). 'Women and ecopoetics: an introduction' in Women and Ecopoetics, *How2 Journal*. 3:2. Web. <https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/introstatements/tarlo_intro.html> [Accessed 2.12.16]

³ Christopher Arigo. 'Notes Towards an Ecopoetics' in Women and Ecopoetics, *How2 Journal*. 3:2. Web. <https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/essays/arigo.html> [Accessed 2.12.16]

The piece reflects upon the tensions between the official narratives surrounding the Bristol and Bath Railway Path – sustainability, human health, regeneration – and the consequences of re-conceptualising a working landscape as ‘green infrastructure’ on working-class and low-income communities. It also considers the relationship between self and landscape, mobility, and the affective qualities of nonhuman and deep time encounters. The multivoice poem incorporates found text derived from archival material and policy documentation, as well as imagery and language – both ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ – prompted by exploratory visits to the path, and by repeated commutes made between the poet’s home in Bristol and their workplace, Bath Spa University. The path, and indeed the cities of Bath and Bristol themselves, may not exist were it not for the presence of the river. For this reason, water flows through the piece, and is brought into focus as a material agency that brings human and non-human lives and communities into relation and obligation.



SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

The ecopoetic sound piece produced in response to the Bristol and Bath Railway Path can be accessed on the publisher’s website.

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