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The Bristol and Bath Railway Path: An Ecopoetic Sound Collaboration

Jonathan Prior and Samantha Walton

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 the charity Sustrans took over the line in 1979. Over the course of fifteen miles, it passes through a range of urban and rural landscapes: It crosses the River Avon multiple times as it winds toward the sea, trailing the course that once connected Avon Valley industries to globalized commerce and the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

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 industrialized sites can be transformed to express intercity 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 Sustrans involves conscious acts of placemaking, both through the commissioning of site-specific sculpture, and the coproduction of art projects involving local communities.

Presented here is the outcome of a collaboration between a human geographer and sound recordist, Jonathan Prior, and an English literature scholar and poet,

Samantha Walton, that takes the form of an eco-poetic sound piece, created in response to the Bristol and Bath Railway Path. The piece combines an open-form eco-poem 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.

Eco-poetics 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 that have been influential in its development.ⁱⁱ We have chosen to call the piece an *eco-poem* because through it we have consciously woven environmental concern and critique with reflections on cultural, social, and ecological histories of place. Collaborative and multimedia techniques help further the eco-poetic qualities of the piece. As Arigo (2007) suggested, like an ecotone, an eco-poem 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.



The piece reflects on the tensions between the official narratives surrounding the Bristol and Bath Railway Path—sustainability, human health, regeneration—and the consequences of reconceptualising 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, might 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 force that brings human and nonhuman lives and communities into relation and obligation.

Supplemental Material

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

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ⁱ The 2.4 million trips a year figure was compiled by Sustrans in 2007, with usage increasing at 10 percent a year. If it has, that would amount to 5.7 million trips a year! See Grimshaw (2008). 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 Bristol and Bath Railway Path from Bristol suburbs to the city center. 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 (2011) and *Better by Bike* (2015). 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.

ⁱⁱ See Bate (2001), Skinner's various writings in the ecopoetics journal and in *Jacket2*, and Tarlo (2007).