

Application: M4C2022

Midlands4Cities Doctoral Training Partnership

Application Form

Your Proposed Project

For applicants to the Open Doctoral Competition: Please provide details of your proposed project. Read the Guidance Notes to help you. For applicants to the Collaborative Doctoral Award (CDA) competition: Please provide details of the purpose and reasons for undertaking research on the collaborative project. Read the Guidance Notes to help you.

Please provide a project title for your proposed programme of research

[The Aesthetics and Hermeneutics of the Secret in Contemporary British Fiction, 1998-2018.](#)

Project Proposal (max.500 words)

Please outline as relevant to the stage of your research at the time of applying, and with reference (e.g., Jones, 2017) to existing literature in the field:

The **context** of your project (i.e., the research or practice background to the problem/challenge/research gap you will investigate).

The **research question(s)** it will answer.

The **method(s)** you will use to investigate your research question(s).

The **impact(s)** your project could make in terms of an original contribution to knowledge in the field(s), and beyond academia (e.g., in professional and creative practice, industry, etc).

An **indicative structure/timeline** for your project across the duration of the award you are applying for.

CDA applicants will want to consider the **context** and **research questions** slightly differently, please see the guidance notes for details.

My project offers the first investigation of 'the secret' as a narrative aesthetic in contemporary British fiction. I argue that the secret, in its concealment and selective redistribution of knowledge, disrupts a culture of secrecy key to neoliberalism's transformation of social relations. In this disruption, I argue that the secret comprises a changing battleground in fiction, where neoliberalism's transformation of social relations is exposed and contested. My research extends a conception of neoliberalism as a global rationality producing certain social relations and forms of existence (Dardot and Laval 2011, Chandler and Reid 2016). My thesis is that understanding changing approaches to the breaking and keeping of secrets is key to understanding contemporary British fiction in an age of neoliberalism. I will analyse Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998), Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), Anthony Joseph's *The African Origins of UFOs* (2006), Zadie Smith's *N-W* (2012), and Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018). Individually, these award-winning novels and writers attract an emerging body of scholarship but are yet to be studied comparatively. My project extends my MPhil research, which analyses secrets as a changing communicative technology in relation to neoliberalism in Kay's early fiction (1998 – 2002).

Neoliberalism's erasure of the public sphere has caused the proliferation of an anti-democratic secrecy in once 'shared and openly-acknowledged' sites for discussing political, moral, and social issues (Gilbert 2007: 23). Such public secrecy takes form in the normalization of non-disclosure agreements in the workplace, or laws such as the Official Secrets Act which prohibit the disclosure of information. Secrets which are

exposed in the public sphere are subjected to a system of 'revelation-management'; where revealing secrets becomes part of a spectacle distracting from the generalized secrecy of the political system (Debord 1998; Dean 2002; Braitch 2007: 47). Such revelations might include the strategic dispersal of leaks by unaccountable government departments, or the predominance of the 'private' confessional column and exposé in journalism. Secrets exposed publicly undergird the mechanisms that produce them and, consequently, secrets are 'complicit with a solipsistic logic of privatisation' and 'the anti-social logic of neoliberalism' (Gilbert 2007: 22, 35). However, rather than considering 'the secret' as subjected to regulation, Birchall (2011, 2014) conceptualises the secret as a site of radical politics. In working through the secret, through the redistribution and selective disclosure of knowledge, the secret can disrupt the hegemonic culture of secrecy and enable the imagination of other subjectivities.

My thesis's significance lies in complicating current debates within contemporary literary culture which, without analysing the role of the secret, argue that the novel since the Clinton-Blair Nineties has enforced the neoliberal transformation of social relations (Huehls and Smith 2017; Johansen and Karl 2017). Focusing on the division of knowledge, rather than the division of labour, my thesis will be the first to situate contemporary British fiction within the emergent, interdisciplinary field of 'Secrecy Studies' to evince how the aesthetics of the secret are key to understanding the novel and its relationship with neoliberalism since the turn of the century (Melley 2012, Birchall 2016).

AHRC Subject Remit

Please review the AHRC subject remit guidelines and indicate as far as you can a primary research area and, if applicable, a secondary research area; these should both be from Level 2 categories.

<https://ahrc.ukri.org/funding/research/subjectcoverage/ahrc-disciplines/>

Primary (Level 1): [Languages and literatures](#)

Secondary (Level2): [English literature](#)

Ethics (max.200 words)

All research projects **must** comply with relevant research ethics and integrity guidelines. Please review your proposed home institution's guidelines and outline:

Any **Ethical considerations** in the context of your project (e.g. in relation to research participants/stakeholders, data collection and storage, archive use, copyright, intellectual property etc.); and

How you will **address potential ethical concerns** (e.g., informed consent, anonymisation, ethics training needs for yourself and/or participants, identification of support services etc.)

Throughout my research, I will adhere to Warwick's seven core research principles, to ensure I produce original and exemplary work: Excellence, Integrity, Honesty and Openness, Co-operation, Accountability, Training and Skills, Safety. It is unlikely that my doctoral research project will encounter any significant ethical or intellectual property issues. However, if there is any reason to consider ethical and intellectual property issues during the development of my thesis I will consult the University of Warwick's 'Research Code of Practice' document, which is updated annually, and complete any necessary self-assessment forms and procedures. The same also applies for the University of Birmingham. I would consult their 'Code of Practice for Research' and ensure I complete any required self-assessment forms and procedures. I also understand that, upon completion, my thesis will likely be digitized through the British Library's Ethos service. Consequently, I will ensure that any material included within my

thesis is free from copyright restriction. Lastly, through my experience volunteering in a food bank, and my time teaching children, I am aware that if I pursue any aspects of community engagement then I am responsible for undertaking the relevant criminal background checks, such as a DBS check.

Research Activities (max. 200 words)

Complete this section if your proposed project will require you to undertake fieldwork, study visits or practice (beyond routine dissemination and engagement events). For each activity, please provide indicative details about:

Where the activity will take place (i.e., country, institute, archive, centre etc)

How long the activity will take (i.e., days, weeks)

Why the activity is required (i.e., how will the activity support you to complete your research? e.g., enable data collection, stakeholder engagement, language practice, test theoretical argument etc).

What costs are likely to be incurred (travel, accommodation, room hire, training costs)

Contingency plans in the event that activity cannot go ahead due to risk assessment outcomes (e.g., restrictions due to COVID-19).

USA, California, Stanford University, The Hoover Institute, 2-3 week archival visit, to consult the papers of the Mont Pelerin Society (Collection Number: 81123) and F.A.Hayek (Collection Number: 86002). I am particularly interested in Hayek's 'unpublished manuscripts on economics and psychology' and his unpublished work on the interrelationship of knowledge, economy and society: • Box/Folder 103:12 – "Economic Systems of Principles of Social Organisation, holograph undated" • Box/Folder 138:19 – "The Communication Function of the Market (1961)" • Box/Folder 189:1 – "The Formation of Open Society' University of Dallas Commencement 1975, May 8th". These papers will provide access to important neo-liberal theorising about knowledge and society and will enrich my thesis arguments.

Likely costs will be a return flight £600; 21 nights AirBNB £1800.

If travel remains restricted, then I will approach the library for digital images of some key documents.

Extended Funding (max. 200 words)

A standard award is for 3.5 years full-time. An award can be extended up to a maximum of 6 months full-time or 12 months part-time.

Requests for extended funding can be made where there is a rationale for complex or extended training, skills acquisition (e.g., research cannot be completed without acquisition of new, high-level skills), extended research/fieldwork/extended practice activities, visits, or extended practice or placement needs (e.g., due to significant challenges with collaboration, access and/or logistics).

Please see application guidelines for further details. All such requests must make a case for the need and explain how it is integral to your research.

Complete this section if you anticipate that you will require extended funding. Please provide details of the:

Training/skills development, operational challenges or extended practice activities you anticipate.

Planned **destinations and purpose** of visits for fieldwork or placements.

and **indicative length** of additional time you will require. The allocation of extended funding will be confirmed after the first mid-year review.

Not applicable

Person and Preparedness

If applicable, please provide details about your qualifications.

Undergraduate Degree

Subject [English](#)

Degree [BA \(hons\)](#)

Classification [First](#)

Completion Date: [xxxx](#)

Postgraduate Degree (Master's or equivalent international qualification)

If you are not studying for/do not hold a Master's but have equivalent professional experience, please proceed to the next questions and provide details there.

Subject [Modern and Contemporary Literature](#)

Qualification [MPhil](#)

Classification [distinction](#)

Completion Date [xxxx](#)

Previous study and Experience (max.500 words)

Describe how you are ready to undertake your proposed doctoral research project based on your previous study and experience. You might comment on: [max. 500 words].

Knowledge and skills developed through previous study (e.g., undergraduate/postgraduate studies (including specific modules), certifications, training etc) and/or **professional and creative practice** (e.g., employment, research assistantships, consultancy, residencies, performances, curations, internships etc).

Specialised training (e.g., languages, ICT, methods, EDI etc).

Academic and professional achievements (e.g., awards, scholarships, publications etc).

If appropriate, you should also identify any training you might need to undertake or skills you might need to gain in order to complete your project. These may include:

Language proficiency

Research methods in data collection, such as interviewing, archive use, and associated ethical practice.

Data management and processing, particularly where specific software is required

Project management, including in practice and curation.

I bring an exceptional academic record to this project, together with specific and deep knowledge of the contemporary period. Due to my high academic aptitude during my first year of undergraduate studies, I successfully won a place on my university's highly-competitive, university-wide program to study abroad. During my second year, I spent one semester studying at Concordia University, Montréal, Canada, reading Canadian Modernism, Contemporary Female Writers, Caribbean Literature, Sociolinguistics, and Psycholinguistics. Upon completing my studies there, I achieved an overall 4.3 GPA. My experience studying abroad and the success I made of it was instrumental in the overall achievement of my English BA. In addition to modules taken in Concordia I have also studied multiple modules encompassing contemporary fiction during my time at both my undergraduate and postgraduate universities. At undergraduate, I wrote on the relationship between the NHS, mental health, and Thatcherite neoliberalism in Janice Galloway's *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (79); (pre-)figurations of Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* in H.G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (78); and the changing interrelationship between capitalism, imperialism, and literature in the work of Samuel Johnson, Sir Walter Scott, Arundhati Roy, and John Lanchester (78). As well as extending the work of my Masters dissertation, my project also builds on my understanding of Joseph's *Origins* which I developed during my BA dissertation on Afrofuturism (85). My dissertation is the first article-length exegesis of *Origins* and is

currently being reviewed for publication by the online journal Innervate as 'leading' work. I graduated with the School of English prize for 'Best Single Honours Undergraduate' (79), 'Best Dissertation' (85), and the 'University Prize' as the most exemplary graduate from the Faculty of Arts. I have also won a prestigious Masters Scholarship to support my MPhil studies. I have all the necessary academic skills and knowledge to undertake this project.

I also completed a university Advantage Award (September 2016 - June 2019): An extracurricular qualification gained for professional skills development. As part of the qualification, I worked as teaching support for English students at a local school for a six month period; received Safeguarding training as a Peer Mentor to anew undergraduate cohort of eight students for one academic year; and received training in leadership and teamwork skills as part of a career skills and employability module. The personal and professional skills I developed during this qualification will aid me in teaching undergraduates as a PhD candidate, presenting to diverse audiences within and beyond the academy, and working as a leader and team-member within an eclectic cohort of M4C DTP candidates. I have also completed Microsoft Office Specialist Training in Excel 2016 (UG: February 2019 - March 2019): this qualification enabled me to produce a detailed projected budget that was instrumental in successfully gaining funding for a postgraduate academic conference (£400). These skills will be essential in making the most of the opportunities offered by Midlands4Cities.

Any other information (max.150 words)

Is there any other information you would like to bring to the panel's attention? For instance, you might wish to note extenuating circumstances, such as illness, which have affected your previous performance.

Not applicable