My principal research concern for the past seven years has been the poetry (largely collected from newspapers) of the Lancashire Cotton Famine of 1861–1865 – the regional literary response to economic hardship caused by the Union’s blockading of Confederate cotton exports during the American Civil War. The study of this topic would seem to epitomize an off-centre approach, a focus on cultures of provincialism. Initially, there may even have been an expectation that the subject would mostly remain within the region, and that the wilful and unmistakeable literary marker of provincialism, dialect poetry, would be the primary output. In practice, poetry was also collected from several other British regions, Ireland, France, Australia, and many examples from both sides of the American conflict commenting on Lancashire’s economic plight during the crisis. What began as a self-consciously provincial study quickly became global in scope as the literary-political discourse particular to newspaper publication of poetry was uncovered.1 However, the popular regional and national reception of Lancashire dialect poetry – which in the end constituted only approximately 10% of the 400 or so poems collected on the eventual database – peaked in the 1860s, according to Brian Hollingworth, the only anthologizer of Cotton Famine poetry in the twentieth century.2 Of course, this is also the decade identified by Boyd Hilton (as noted by Ruth Livesey) when it was actually ‘chic to be provincial’.3 It is tempting to imagine that a regional economic crisis which crippled the national industrial base and attracted worldwide attention to a British provincial culture played a part in this popularity.

Understandably, during the period of the Union blockade of cotton – the economic life-blood of the region – sympathy for starving Lancashire workers was widespread, but a metropolitan fascination for the densely populated northwest of England had been growing for decades. This fascination, though initiated by Lancashire’s status as the hub of the Industrial Revolution, was centred on language. There was a recognition that parts of provincial England, at the same time that they could represent the compelling ‘dullness’ identified by Ruth Livesey and dissected by George Eliot, could be tantalizingly exotic. The national popularity of Edwin Waugh’s 1856 dialect poem ‘Come Whaom to thi’ Childer and Me’ initiated an interest in Lancashire dialect poetry that celebrated the universality of domestic concerns expressed in linguistic obscurity. The provinces were near but far, familiar but unheimlich, ours but themselves. During the Cotton Famine one Punch versifier even attempted to build the

1 As Andrew Hobbs had warned me it would when we met to discuss the project in April 2016.
2 Brian Hollingworth (ed.), Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect Poetry of the Industrial Revolution (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), pp. 112–13. Brian was also present at the meeting to plan the project in April 2016.
ultimate literary bridge, and balanced sympathy and parody with a cod-Lancashire dialect effort, purporting to be a plea to the magazine to publicize charitable efforts:

DEAR Poonch, mi friend, ev cum to u
To beg yur helping hand;
Weel knawin when the poor mon's pressed,
Yur sure by him to stand.

Afore this Yanky war bruk oot
That's made the cotton short,
We'd help'd oorsens, and neer axt nort,
Us scorned at such a thowt.4 (ll. 1–8)

In a similar manner to the provincial distribution and adaptation of Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* tracked in this edition by Katie Holdway, this poem originally published in *Punch* was reproduced in a provincial newspaper, the *Bury Times*, at the height of regional suffering. Anyone who spends any amount of time studying Victorian local newspaper poetry becomes familiar with the ‘Pickings from *Punch*’ phenomenon. But this recontextualization, with provincial language distorted by a metropolitan publication and then re-appropriated by a provincial newspaper, represents a similarly significant political statement to the various interpretations of Dickens’ debut. To readers in Bury, the clumsy orthography is a deliberately incompetent celebration of difference, an affectionate literary feedback loop between centre and province which signifies a determination to generate financial assistance to alleviate local suffering with a global cause.

Provincialism though, often suggests both unconscious and conscious attitudes and behaviours which in some way attempt to resist the gravitational pull of the centre, while never leaving its orbit. One very conscious observation of provincialism is provided by the blacksmith and dialect poet William Cunliffe (publishing as ‘Williffe Cunliam’), in his 1863 work ‘Settling th’War’.5 Here, that ‘bumptiousness’ so readily associated with the provincial worldview is presented comically with a poignant undertow, as locally influential orators in the mill town of Burnley, taken up with the region’s thrust into geopolitical importance during the American Civil War, seem nevertheless unaware of their total lack of agency.

Wot’s the matter? – wot’s the matter? –
Wot’s theas folks, all stanin raond?
Hez ther sum’uddy bin feightin,
Ur ther’s sum’uddy kill’d ur draown’d?

Oh! aw know, naoh, - aw’d forgettun –
Welly six-months, fur ur nar,
Heer aor parliment’s bin meetin,
Bizzy settlin o’ th’ war.

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Chaps wi’ noddles full o’ larning;
Yeds ut’s brasting wi’ ther wit,
Heer yo’ll find, boath neet un morning,
Gie’ing the world the benefit\(^6\) (ll. 1–12)

The observer lampoons local bigwigs for their provincialism and political naivety, but the fact that subsequent discussion of the particulars of the foreign war are represented through phonetically rendered Lancashire dialect emphasizes the uneven relationship between the centrifugal edges and the centres of political action. While this representation of provincialism clearly locates the primary centre as the American War, radiating international political disruption through its interruption of the commercial status quo, the use of the term ‘parlyment’ suggests another comparison with the English capital. Of course, the term ‘parliament’ has a more general meaning, but the sense here is that London, in itself and as a synecdoche for the British seat of political power, is the unspoken third element in a complex relational triumvirate.

While provincialism is defined by its relationship, however indefinite, to the centre, the location of that centre in the provincial imaginary can shift. Lancashire, of course, had its own centre, and had a provincial relationship not just with the south of England, but with the urban entity of Manchester. Norman Longmate identifies the beginnings of Manchester’s self-declared rivalry with London (reignited in the city’s economic and cultural revival in the 1990s) in its growth as the commercial centre of the cotton trade, rather than the centre of production \textit{per se}:

Manchester was sometimes whimsically referred to as ‘cottonopolis’, though its citizens preferred the term ‘the capital of the north’. Disraeli, impressed by the city’s commanding position in British business, considered it ‘rightly understood, as great a human exploit as Athens’, though he was referring to its commercial supremacy rather than its architecture.\(^7\)

With placenames including Oxford Street, Victoria Station, and Piccadilly Square, Victorian Manchester’s metropolitan ambitions might seem comically provincial, but by 1861 it had itself become the nominative template for 37 towns or cities in the United States.\(^8\) The city was the effective administrative centre of a county with a population of 2.5 million – though representing only 3% of the geographical surface area of England and Wales, Lancashire contained 12% of its population.

Although outside the region Manchester and Lancashire were often conflated as political or cultural entities, in terms of the experience of the Cotton Famine there were important distinctions. Manchester’s vaunted liberal traditions were evident when a meeting of workers and industrialists in the city’s Free Trade Hall in December 1862 declared their support for the Union in defiance of the London government’s political neutrality. For Abraham Lincoln,


\(^8\) Longmate, \textit{The Hungry Mills}, p. 35.
with the Union and Confederacy locked in deadly stalemate, this was an important development as he prepared to shift the moral *casus belli* from secession to emancipation. In the same month of January 1863 when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln also published an open letter to the ‘working-men of Manchester, England’, stating that ‘I know and deeply deplore the sufferings which the working-men of Manchester, and in all Europe, are called to endure in this crisis’, and praising the ‘sublime Christian heroism, which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country’. Jonathan Memel has noted the influence of provincialism on aspects of the Crimean War in relation to Florence Nightingale during the previous decade. In an admittedly more singular manner, a provincial industrial city in this case briefly achieves geopolitical significance, albeit via acts of performative propaganda. However, quite apart from the obviously hyperbolic moral celebration, and the misrepresentation of the gender make-up of the northwest textile industry where women and children constituted at least half of the workforce, the language of Lincoln’s letter does several interesting things.

For one political moment Manchester’s provincial status is erased as the Union attempts to recognize it as a kind of spiritual capital of Britain, or indeed Europe. Memel notes that in some of her writing Nightingale frames provinciality as ‘stifling, forcing the individual into a deadening adherence to convention’, but *in extremis*, in the upheaval caused by a conflict with international ramifications, Manchester finds itself under political scrutiny, and rebels against the centre. Lincoln’s address bypasses London, but it also bypasses the rest of Lancashire as it seemingly spreads the suffering of textile workers evenly across the continent. It is true that the blockade affected economies across Europe, but real hardship was concentrated in the textile regions of northwest England, Belgium, and France. Manchester, with a population of 460,000 in 1861, contained approximately 100 of the 2000 cotton mills in the region, and had a more varied economy than most smaller Lancashire towns and therefore withstood the effects of the Cotton Famine proportionately much better than towns like Preston, where in the ‘Big Freeze’ winter of 1862–1863 half of the population were on relief.

Contrary to popular mythologies of stoic suffering in the face of hunger and hardship, and in contrast to the abolitionist, Union-supporting discourse prevalent in Manchester, non-metropolitan Lancashire people quite naturally felt anger towards America during the first half of the 1860s. One attempt to garner British sympathy for the northern side of the conflict was represented by a relief ship from the Union carrying barrels of flour to feed starving Lancashire workers which landed in Liverpool in the spring of 1863. The ‘George Griswold’s’ chaplain, the Reverend C. Denison, set off on a regional speaking tour to bolster Union support in the provinces, counting on abolitionist sympathies. He spoke at a Burnley Mechanics’ Institution meeting, but the partisan report of the *Lancaster Gazette* (18 April 1863) claims he received an ‘overwhelming rebuke’ for his interference led by one William Cunliffe (see above). Cunliffe had lived in America for five years in the 1850s, and he took an active part in the debate in the region over neutrality, often sympathizing with the Confederate right to self-determination. In another meeting he claimed that in his experience Black Americans were treated better in the South than in the North. However, Cunliffe’s implicit support for the institution of slavery, and his relative cosmopolitanism, were atypical. Lack of enthusiasm

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for the cause of the Union in smaller Lancashire towns was more usually expressed through omission, which can only be perceived when working at scale. Helen O’Neill’s examination of ‘the affordances of reading widely but closely’ is appropriate not just to the vast corpus of Victorian fictional endeavour, but to the scale of production offered by provincial cultural production. The Lancashire Cotton Famine’s digital humanities approach is very different from O’Neill’s definitional network analysis, but on a smaller scale that blend of data collation and close reading led to some significant observations. However, in this case the salient information is not in the ‘textually small’, but in the textually absent. From hundreds of poems on the subject of the Cotton Famine, many of which referred directly to the American war, hardly any included mention of the suffering of Lancashire workers and enslaved American people within the same text. The provincial habit of perceiving the outside world through a reductive lens, the essence of ‘small-mindedness’, here becomes a useful political tool. Looking too deeply into the moral consequences of the return of cotton, which several poems called for, would be to confront the fact that Lancashire’s former prosperity was largely built on the suffering of enslaved peoples.

In relation to the Crimean War Jonathan Memel identifies what he defines as a ‘popular provincial response’, which operates as a means of ‘managing the war’s unsettling threat by recourse to the ordinary and the everyday’. A similar, if more morally monocular, effect can be seen through the register across hundreds of Lancashire Cotton Famine poems in the following decade, where the crisis is perceived as a consequence or even a part of the American Civil War, but a refusal to take in the wider moral picture is enabled by a resolutely provincial sensibility. If the conflict remains an ‘abstract, global force’ then local processes of grief, sympathy and support can continue without unnecessary complication. Manchester might have embraced its provincial relationship with London through an oppositional rejection of political neutrality (attaining in the process a modicum of centrality), but Lancashire for the most part used elements of provincialism’s wilful ignorance as a tool of survival, as a protracted foreign war appeared to threaten its ordinary and everyday existence.

The contributions to this New Agenda edition evidently speak to each other in relation to the subject of provincialism as a term and as a concept. But the fact they are so disparate in their approaches while maintaining a high level of relevance and intellectual novelty suggests that Victorian provincialism is a subject which has yet to yield the full nature of its cultural significance. Defined by relational perceptions, provincialism is both slippery and sticky (to borrow Helen O’Neill’s term), depending on the political function it serves, and through which end of the telescope it is being viewed. As Ruth Livesey’s introduction suggests, the global shift away from consensus politics, of which Brexit is symptomatic, has brought what was once in danger of becoming a nebulous entity into sharper focus, and a return to the Victorian conception of provincialism can be instructive. Certainly, the opportunity the digital age offers for new methodologies with which to unpack meaning from the mass of neglected data from the peripheries indicates that this is the historical moment for significant study of the provincial. The pejorative connotations of the term ‘provincialism’ can appear to reduce its significance, but the provinces, by definition, are the majority. Centres, whether they hold or not, might regard themselves as exceptional, or as concentrated cores; but they are defined existentially by, and consist of the stuff of, what lies beyond.

**DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.