Vagrancy Law, Police Reform, and the Poetics of Surplus Population

Literary critics have long attended to the aesthetic significance of vagrancy in British Romantic poetry, especially in the works of Wordsworth. The legal category of vagrancy, however, often diverged quite sharply from its aesthetic use; while poets such as Wordsworth and Southey imagined "the vagrant" as a uniquely mobile poetic subject, theorists and enforcers of vagrancy law conceptualized vagrancy as the obverse of legible legal and economic subjectivity: the vagrant is one who, in the words of many statutes, "can give no good account" of themselves.

Vagrancy law, I argue, fundamentally structured how eighteenth-century theorists of police power imagined urban space and global geographies. This paper investigates the writings of magistrate and police reformer Patrick Colquhoun alongside Mary Robinson's critical engagement with vagrancy in her last collection of poetry, the *Lyrical Tales* (1800), in which Robinson turns her poetic attention to populations that Malthus deemed "redundant" and Marx would later term "surplus." Robinson draws on the legal category of vagrancy in order to critically resignify the spatial imagination of police power. Robinson's poetic engagements with vagrancy thus offer insight into how poetry and law intersected at the end of the eighteenth century.