

Institution: Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU)		
Unit of Assessment: 34		
Title of case study: Re-Placing Malcolm Lowry: Exploring the Cultural Significance of Place and Identity in and through Lowry's Life and Work		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Jan 2015- Dec 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Helen Tookey	Lecturer/Senior Lecturer, Creative Writing	Jan 2015 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Jan 2015 – Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>The project focuses on the writer Malcolm Lowry (1909–1957), author of the acclaimed modernist novel <i>Under the Volcano</i> (1947). The project began in 2009 with a programme of centenary celebrations and has continued to the present; this study will focus on impact of the project from 2015 onwards (i.e. the period in which Dr Tookey has been employed by the submitting HEI). The project has the overall aim of 're-placing' Lowry as a Merseyside writer and exploring his continued cultural relevance through a range of public engagement activities. Underpinned by research evidenced in a 2015 peer-reviewed article, 2019 poetry collection and 2020 co-edited academic book (plus a 2009 co-edited book), the project has achieved the following impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raised the profile of Lowry as a writer born on Merseyside, resulting in the installation of a blue heritage plaque in his birthplace, New Brighton, in 2019. • Made Lowry's life and works accessible to new audiences through a wide range of public activities, including guided local walks, illustrated talks, film screenings, a conference, and new artistic commissions. • Enabled the articulation of key 'lines of enquiry' governing the ongoing work of Bluecoat, Liverpool's centre for contemporary art, with particular focus on modernism, heritage, and public engagement. 		
2. Underpinning research <p>The central line of research for the project has been the cultural significance of <i>place</i> in Lowry's life and work: specifically, the imbrication for him of place and subjectivity (as captured in the concept of psychogeography), and the ongoing importance in his work of Liverpool and the Wirral peninsula. These topics were initially explored, using a range of academic and creative-critical methods, in Bryan Biggs and Helen Tookey (eds), <i>Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World</i> (Liverpool UP, 2009). Tookey then analysed the concept of 're-placing' Lowry in her 2015 peer-reviewed article (R1), which formed part of a special issue of <i>Journal of Writing in Creative Practice</i> focused on place-based arts, developed from papers given to a conference on the same subject at the University of Brighton. The article showed why place is a fruitful cultural concept through which to explore Lowry's work and legacy, and examined how the project was using a range of public activities to raise Lowry's profile on Merseyside. Tookey further explored the relationship between place and identity in the poems and creative non-fiction collected in <i>City of Departures</i> (2019) (R2), which was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection 2019; following a residency in September 2019 at the Elizabeth Bishop House in Great Village, Nova Scotia, she is now working on a creative non-fiction book exploring place in relation to Bishop and Lowry.</p> <p>The relevance of Merseyside in Lowry's work took on new significance with the rediscovery of a manuscript of his 'lost' novel, <i>In Ballast to the White Sea</i>, and its publication in a critical edition by Ottawa University Press in 2014. Written in the mid-1930s, <i>In Ballast</i> is the only one of Lowry's works to be substantially set on Merseyside and it is also his most overtly political work, focusing on class struggle, the threat of fascism and the potential of communism for a new world order.</p>		

From 2015 onwards our project has drawn on *In Ballast* in a number of ways. Wirral-based writer and researcher Colin Dilnot worked with New Zealand scholar Chris Ackerley to produce the scholarly annotations for the critical edition, and Biggs and Tookey therefore commissioned him to run a number of guided *In Ballast* walks as part of Lowry Lounge events. In 2017, Tookey organised a two-day international conference on Lowry at LJMU and Bluecoat; although this was not specifically themed around *In Ballast*, it was apparent that the publication of the novel represented fertile new ground for Lowry studies, hence that became the focus for *Remaking the Voyage*, a groundbreaking collection of scholarly essays edited by Tookey and Biggs (Liverpool UP, 2020) (**R3**) and the first academic book to focus on *In Ballast to the White Sea*. The book includes a 7000-word introductory chapter in which Tookey and Biggs argue that *In Ballast* opens up new readings of Lowry's oeuvre in three main areas: place; politics; and process. Canadian Lowry scholar Richard J. Lane states that '*Remaking the Voyage* undoubtedly makes a major contribution to Lowry studies, perhaps unsurprisingly given the strength of the academic contributors; it genuinely advances humanistic knowledge of Lowry's *In Ballast*, additionally offering an intriguing identity politics argument or interpretive nexus, comprising cultural and geographical location, class and political awareness/affiliation'.

This sense of Lowry as a figure with continuing cultural relevance, especially in relation to sociopolitical and place-related issues, continues to frame the project activities and the research underpinning them. In summer 2020 we began a two-year AHRC Research Networking funded project led by Dr Alan Dunn (Leeds Beckett University) with Helen Tookey as co-investigator (**F1**). This research focuses on Lowry as a proto-ecological writer, using his short-story collection *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* as a creative starting-point for thinking about issues of ocean pollution and our relationship with the natural world. This successful funding application developed out of Alan Dunn's involvement with the Lowry project in 2017 via a new artistic commission, *The Lighthouse Invites the Storm*, funded by Arts Council England (**F2**) and detailed in section 4 below.

3. References to the research

- **R1** Tookey, Helen, 'Re-placing Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the world (and back again)', *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 8:2&3 (2015): 193–215. DOI 10.1386/jwcp.8.2&3.193_1.
- **R2** Tookey, Helen, *City of Departures* (Carcenet Press, 2019)
- **R3** Tookey, Helen and Bryan Biggs (eds), *Remaking the Voyage: New Essays on Malcolm Lowry and In Ballast to the White Sea* (Liverpool University Press, 2020). Edited volume containing introductory chapter by the editors and chapters by internationally eminent Lowry scholars from UK, US, Canada, France and New Zealand, alongside newer voices.

Project funding

- **F1** Dunn, Alan, and Tookey, Helen, AHRC Research Networking Proposal AH/T004800/1, 'Hear us O Lord ... using sound and Malcolm Lowry's short stories to create a new vocabulary for re-imagining plastic-filled seas'. Principal Investigator Dr Alan Dunn, Leeds Beckett University; Co-Investigator Dr Helen Tookey, Liverpool John Moores University. Proposal submitted March 2019; funding confirmed May 2020.
- **F2** 67projects (Alan Dunn), and Tookey, Helen, 'The Lighthouse Invites the Storm: Malcolm Lowry's Wirral', Arts Council England/Grants for the Arts application GFTA-00025731. Proposal submitted October 2016, funding confirmed November 2016.

4. Details of the impact

Context (pre-2015)

The project began in 2009 with *Under the Volcano: An Exhibition for Malcolm Lowry*, and an accompanying programme of events, curated at Bluecoat by its Artistic Director Bryan Biggs

(September–November 2009; **S1**). This programme demonstrated public interest in a locally born, but relatively unknown, writer, suggesting continuation of the project. The model of multi-media/multi-platform events also indicated a successful way to engage audiences and ‘bring a writer to life’ by setting his life and works in different creative and cultural contexts. We therefore developed the concept of the ‘Lowry Lounge’, an annual day-long Lowry-related events programme starting in 2010, including talks, film screenings, creative performances, and guided walks, themed around his work and its local contexts. Led by Biggs and Tookey, the project steering group included academics/creative practitioners from the universities of Bradford (Mark Goodall), Edge Hill (Robert Sheppard, Ailsa Cox) and Leeds Beckett (Alan Dunn), plus a local historian and researcher (Colin Dilnot).

Impact 2015–present

New artistic commissions and collaborations

Each Lowry event has featured new artistic responses to Lowry’s life and work. Notable examples post-2015 include *Shot Under the Volcano* (2017; a collaboration between John Hyatt, Director of the LJMU Institute of Art and Technology, artist Mike Chavez-Dawson, students and staff from LJMU, and businesses in Liverpool’s Fabric District); and Alan Dunn’s *The Lighthouse Invites the Storm* (2017).

The Lighthouse Invites the Storm

In July 2017, Tookey ran a two-day academic conference on Lowry, held at LJMU and Bluecoat, featuring eminent international Lowry scholars. To create an accompanying public engagement strand, she used QR funding as match-funding to enable a successful ACE application (R2, above) for a new artistic commission, *The Lighthouse Invites the Storm*. Tookey commissioned lead artist/applicant Alan Dunn, with musician Martin Heslop and writer/LJMU lecturer Jeff Young (plus guest musicians), to work with retired merchant seamen at Mariners’ Park, Wallasey, weaving their personal stories with the figure of Lowry into a multi-media performance piece. This was performed at Bluecoat (to a general audience) on 29 July 2017 and at Mariners’ Park (to the retired seamen and their families) the following day (**S2**). The work was subsequently recorded and made available on CD (**S3**). The success of this project, in particular working with the retired mariners, led Dunn and Tookey to develop the previously mentioned AHRC Research Networking Proposal focusing on Lowry’s ecologically-focused short stories to engage with the topic of ocean pollution, bringing together researchers, sound artists, retired mariners and members of the public. Dunn has commented as follows on the impact of this project on his ongoing creative practice:

The Lighthouse Invites the Storm project impacted hugely upon my artistic practice in terms of unpacking a set of published Malcolm Lowry writings not through more text but through participatory, audio, visual and public interventionist works. In particular, the density of his writing in *Ultramarine* and *Under the Volcano* – the high-definition quality of description – made me explore a more ‘fuzzy’ aesthetic, and this is an area I’ve explored in subsequent research.

The Lowry project, and particularly spending time with the retired mariners, also enabled me for the first time to consider my own maritime heritage. Both my father and grandfather worked on ships and hovercrafts respectively on the River Clyde; my curiosity about life at sea obviously lay dormant and emerged during the Lowry research. *The Lighthouse Invites the Storm* project, being very much about us being on the coast, looking out, directly led to my situating the AHRC application at sea, during the 8-hour return sailing between Liverpool and Douglas. That is, being at sea has become the context for future practice/research as much as the theme. (**S4**)

The evaluation report by Naomi Horlock (**S5**) on the *Lighthouse Invites the Storm* performances showed positive impact in terms of the engagement with the retired mariners: the seamen ‘hadn’t know what to expect’ from the project but were moved and impressed by hearing their own

memories and experiences woven into the performance; they had enjoyed being introduced to Lowry's seafaring experiences, and they had gained the confidence to talk about their own experiences, for instance to curators from the Merseyside Maritime Museum; thus an oral history element was woven into the project. Responses to the event from the seamen's wives included 'Wonderful', 'Can we have more of this?', and 'Good, interesting, entertaining, informative'. Roger Cliffe-Thompson, Mariners' Park events manager, commented that the event had brought an unfamiliar art form (multi-media performance) to the seamen and their families, and also 'validated' their own experiences. Horlock concludes that the event 'evoked times past and stirred memory' for them, reflecting the project's success in using Lowry as a springboard for creative public engagement work as well as bringing his writing to new audiences.

Public engagement, literary tourism, and border-crossing

As indicated above, the project was underpinned by evidence of public appreciation collected prior to 2015 (notably, following the 2009 exhibition and programme of events, **S1**). This response helped to inform the continued direction of the project, notably the aim of raising Lowry's profile as a locally-born writer and using his life and work to enable public engagement with the arts and culture.

While most of the Lounge events have taken place at Bluecoat in Liverpool, several guided walks have taken place on the Wirral, and the 2018 and 2019 programmes included illustrated talks on Lowry by Biggs and Tookey at the Williamson Art Gallery in Birkenhead. Wirral has below-average levels of arts and cultural engagement¹ and the project has been strongly supported by Wirral Council's Culture and Visitor Economy Team. As part of its 2019 'Borough of Culture' programme, we were invited by Conservation Areas Wirral to devise wording and identify a location for a blue heritage plaque in honour of Lowry, which was unveiled by the Mayor of Wirral on Lowry's birthday, 28 July 2019 (**S6**). As a direct result of our project, there is now a visible tribute to the writer on the seafront in his birthplace. Alison Bailey Smith, Partnerships and Participation Officer at Wirral Council, commented as follows on the visible impact of the project on the Wirral:

During the Liverpool City Region Borough of Culture year, Wirral council showcased the rich heritage of the area and honoured the people who made significant contributions to arts and culture. The Culture Team were proud to work with Conservations Areas Wirral, The Bluecoat and LJMU to mark the life of author, Malcom Lowry. Bryan Biggs of the Bluecoat, Helen Tookey of LJMU and The Firminists rightly wanted a permanent recognition for Lowry within his birth town of New Brighton. Conservations Area Wirral arranged for a blue plaque to be created for Lowry to be attached to the sea wall near Marine Point and members of the Culture Team worked alongside Helen, Bryan and Colin Dilnot in planning a celebratory event in July 2019 to mark Lowry's birthday. Despite the day being blustery, wet and wild this did not daunt those who came to mark the occasion with reminiscences from family members, readings and anecdotes of the great writer. It was a special event and there are hopes to continue to recognise Lowry's contribution to literature. (**S4**)

The plaque acts as a focal point for literary tourists. In an email to Bryan Biggs, visitor Eivind Nerberg described the 'Lowry day' he and his wife had enjoyed:

Many thanks for telling me about the plaque. It was wonderful and moving to be there, to stand and look out at the Mersey, knowing Malcolm had done the same thing, probably many times... Later in the afternoon, in Waterstones, Susan bought for me their only remaining copy of *Under the Volcano*. The paperback I bought in the mid-sixties has sadly long-since disappeared, but what better place to lay my hands on another copy than Lowry's Liverpool. We don't know yet if we'll be able to come to the city next month for its

various Lowry events, but a return to the city and to New Brighton is something we'd love to do at some point'. (S4)

Meanwhile, the annual nature of the Lowry Lounge has enabled the development of a core of regular attenders/participants, who value the (perhaps unique) mix of approaches and activities the events involve, the crossing of often fixed boundaries between the academic and the 'general reader', and the creative possibilities this approach opens up. Regular Lounge participant Mary Morgans commented on the value of the events as follows: 'I appreciate the different activities and the pauses between them at the Lowry Lounge [...] the academic view and the non-academic readers' views, their different meaningful priorities, mental paths taken, each beginning at a Lowry source... to find the excitement of a new course or direction from others. But at root it is probably because of the human contact... the human contact with diverse people who after a year of being in other places with other people turn up again like a tide to sweep over the same shore, but where each year the waves and shore are subtly changed' (S4). This indicates that a particular strength of the project in terms of impact is precisely in its ability to bring together academics, artists, local enthusiasts, and interested members of the public, using Lowry as a figure on which to 'hang' a distinctive programme of locally focused cultural events.

Impact of the project on Bluecoat's strategy and methodology

The project has helped inform and develop Bluecoat's strategic approach to presenting contemporary art. In 2011, the arts centre formalised the 'Lines of Enquiry' underpinning its cultural and artistic work, including the ongoing influence of modernism, the engagement of the arts with society, and the interrogation of heritage from contemporary perspectives (see Tookey, 2015 for more detail). The Lowry project has both helped to define these lines of enquiry and acted as testing-ground for them. Since 2015, it has been influential in repositioning heritage, and its relationship to the contemporary, as one of the three key strands of Bluecoat's work. Bryan Biggs, Bluecoat's Artistic Director, stated: 'Our Lowry collaboration with LJMU has demonstrated the value in revisiting modernist practices, particularly through a psychogeographical lens, an approach that underpinned our tercentenary programme in 2017. For that year, we successfully applied to the National Heritage Lottery to build a new heritage website of digitised material from our archive and stage a highly public programme that included *In the Peaceful Dome* which, like our Lowry exhibition (2009), moved back and forth in time through a range of artworks, documents and artefacts. Our Lowry work also underpins our monthly Talking Poetry sessions that revisit and analyse audio recordings of 20th century and more recent poetry, developing a new audience in the process.' (S4)

Note

1. *Imagine Wirral: Evaluation Report*, 2019

<https://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/documents/s50059826/Enc.%201%20for%20WIRRAL%20CULTURE%20STRATEGY%20IMAGINE%20WIRRAL%202018%20AND%20BOROUGH%20OF%20OCULTURE%202019.pdf>

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1: Bluecoat: evaluation report on Lowry centenary programme (2009)

S2: Fairclough, Damon, 2017: feature in Northern Soul, (10 June 2017)

S3: Dunn, Alan, Martin Heslop, Jeff Young, *The Lighthouse Invites the Storm* (CD, 2017) (Available on request)

S4: Testimonials from (1) Alan Dunn, (2) Alison Bailey-Smith, (3) Eivind Nerberg, (4) Mary Morgans, (5) Bryan Biggs

S5: Horlock, Naomi, 2017: evaluation report on *The Lighthouse Invites the Storm* (ACE-funded commission, GFTA-00025731)

S6: *Wirral Globe* report (29 July 2019)