

Institution: University of Reading		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Literature		
Title of case study: Inspiring new creative practice through engagement with the Samuel Beckett Archive		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012 - 2016		
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:
Prof Steven Matthews	Professor of Modernist Studies	1 January 2013 – present
Dr Mark Nixon	Associate Professor	1 October 2004 – present
Dr Conor Carville	Associate Professor	1 April 2009 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017-20		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The University of Reading holds the world's largest archive of materials relating to the Irish author Samuel Beckett. Beckett is acknowledged to be a canonical writer of the twentieth century; his work transformed the creative landscape of the modern world and his unique and experimental methodologies provide powerful inspiration for the artists who follow him. The Reading Archive contains many of the building-blocks of Beckett's artistry. Through an innovative programme of creative projects, the Samuel Beckett Research Centre (SBRC) has drawn on the world-leading research of its members to (1) encourage creative practitioners to develop new ways of working inspired by the experimental aesthetics of Samuel Beckett; and (2) through the resulting theatrical ventures, raise awareness and profile of the Beckett collection as an asset for local, national and international communities.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The Samuel Beckett Research Centre (SBRC) was established at the University of Reading in 2016. It has grown out of collaborative research between Matthews, Nixon and Carville and acts as a central hub for international research and ongoing creative engagements with the works of Beckett, representing Reading's unique resources and expertise. It has engaged new participants and partners including the British Library (output 1), Trinity College Dublin (output 2), the National Gallery (London), the Wallace Collection, and the National Gallery of Ireland (output 3), plus the Harry Ransom Research Center (output 4). Through these and other partnerships, the SBRC has developed a range of creative, traditional and digital initiatives to grow local, national and international awareness and engagement with the works of Samuel Beckett. The Beckett Archives originated from an exhibition held at Reading in 1971, organised by Professor James Knowlson, OBE. Beckett and his friends donated material for the exhibition, which formed the nucleus of the archive. Beckett continued to support the collection until his death in 1989, donating manuscripts and other items including <i>Livres d'Artiste</i> and paintings by his friends Gerr van Velde, Henri Hayden and Avigdor Arikha. The late film director Anthony Minghella named Reading's Beckett Archive one of the "best-kept arts secrets in Britain" (<i>The Observer</i>, 17 September 2006) and the SBRC's mission is to fully realise the archive's potential.</p> <p>The Centre's reputation for its research and archive and the creative research practice of Matthews and Carville led to a donation from a philanthropic sponsor to establish three 'Creative Fellowships' using the Beckett Archive. Matthews's experience as the inaugural poet in residence at the Oxford Museum of Natural History (2016) and his work with the Wordsworth</p>		

Trust on the volume “Ceaseless Music” engaged the idea of generating new creativity out of the otherwise scholarly context of working with archives (output 5).

Inspired by the Beckett Archive, the underpinning research has developed particular strengths in archival enquiry and Beckett’s interdisciplinary intersections with philosophy and the arts. Matthews’ Beckett research has focussed on the author’s connections to philosophy, which has come together in the 2020 edition *Samuel Beckett’s Philosophy Notes*, co-edited with Matthew Feldman (output 2), which draws on the Beckett Archive at Reading and manuscripts held at Trinity College Dublin. Carville’s interest in Beckett’s knowledge of the visual arts was inspired by the “Art Notebook” manuscript and the German Diaries held in the Archive at Reading. His 2018 book *Samuel Beckett and the Visual* (output 3) draws heavily on these two manuscripts, along with the “Human Wishes” and “Ohio Impromptu” manuscripts, and many more. Carville’s recent work on Patrick Magee, which resulted in a 2020 article for *Studies in Theatre and Performance* (output 1), draws on the taped interviews with Magee held in the Archive. Nixon’s research specialises in Beckett’s manuscripts. Nixon is co-director of the Beckett Manuscript Digital Project, a joint research programme between the Universities of Reading and Antwerp, a venture which won the Modern Language Association’s biannual prize for a Bibliography, Archive, or Digital Project in 2018. Nixon’s research has resulted in a number of publications including an annotated edition of Beckett’s “Echo’s Bones” (output 6) and “German Diaries” (output 4).

3. References to the research

The research of the SBRC involves original and rigorous engagements with the Archive, offering new and insightful readings of Beckett’s own creative processes. These insights have been published in peer-reviewed journals and monographs with established academic presses. They have served as a catalyst for new creative engagements and new thinking and practices in Beckett Studies. All of the work listed here therefore meets or exceeds the 2* quality threshold.

1. Carville C (2020), ‘Beckett, Sade, *The Avengers*: Patrick Magee and character acting in the 1960s’, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 40, pp.1-14.
DOI: [10.1080/14682761.2020.1757318](https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2020.1757318)
2. Matthews, S., Feldman M (2020) (eds) Samuel Beckett, *Philosophy Notes*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press,). CenTAUR ID: <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/81485/>
3. Carville, C (2018). *Samuel Beckett and the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). ISBN 9781108422772
4. Nixon, M (2011) *Beckett’s German Diaries* (London: Continuum) ISBN 9781441152589
5. Matthews, Steven (2017), ‘Meditations and monologues: Beckett’s mid-late prose on the radio’. In: Addyman, D., Feldman, M. and Tønning, E. (eds.) *Samuel Beckett and BBC Radio*. (London: Palgrave) pp. 249-267. ISBN 9781349951307
6. Nixon, M. (2014) Samuel Beckett, *Echo’s Bones*. (London: Faber and Faber). ISBN 9780571246380

4. Details of the impact

A. New ways of working for creative practitioners

In 2017 the SBRC established three ‘Creative Fellowships’ based within the Beckett Archive. The underpinning research suggested to leading members of the Centre the possibility of sparking new forms of creativity out of the otherwise scholarly context of working with archives. The result was the Creative Fellows Programme, designed to learn from Beckett’s transformative example and to inspire new works that are able to engage with non-scholarly, global communities. The objective was to enable modern creative practitioners to develop projects and insights through unique access to, and engagement with, both the Beckett Archive and expertise within the Centre. The Fellowships also aimed to establish new methods for implementing archival materials, allowing non-academic audiences to benefit from effective engagement with Beckett’s published work and manuscripts. Each Fellowship gave the Fellow a significant amount of time in the Beckett Archive to discover, connect with, and explore the collection in a way that focusses mainly on inspiration. The three fellows were not required to produce specific outputs,

but researchers within the Centre were available to support publication, performance and exhibition of any resulting work. As a result, the three Creative Fellows – Eimear McBride (author, and winner of the inaugural Goldsmiths Prize in 2013 and the Baileys Women’s Prize for Fiction in 2014): Robert McCrum (writer, former editor-in-chief at Faber & Faber and associate editor at *The Observer*), and Tim Parkinson (composer and pianist, whose music has been commissioned and performed by ensembles including the London Sinfonietta, and broadcast on BBC Radio 3) – produced, between them, several pieces of work, which were major artistic departures.

Inspired by the outputs in section 3 and by the wealth of information in the archive, McBride created three pieces of drama – a new mode for her – under the title *Mouthpieces*. These were broadcast by the Republic of Ireland national broadcaster, RTE, as an audio drama performance (E1). RTE also screened a documentary (in which Nixon and Matthews appear) on McBride’s engagement with Beckett’s last work *Stirrings Still* in the Archive (E1). McBride says the Creative Fellowship completely changed her creative practice (E2), as is evidenced in the short biography in *Strange Hotel* (E3).

McCrums was inspired to undertake a number of activities, including writing a play entitled *Full Moon*, two 2018 BBC Radio 4 (weekly reach 10.98 million) documentaries on Beckett’s Last Tapes and an article in *The Observer* (circulation 159,780) (E4). A scripted performance of the play was premiered in 2019. McCrum describes the latter as a new enterprise for him. He had not written a piece of drama since he was at college and the Fellowship inspired a marked change in his artistic direction, describing how the fellowship had “set fire” to his imagination (E5).

Parkinson was also influenced significantly by his experience in the Beckett Archive, especially on an orchestral piece he was composing at the time he started his Fellowship. He subsequently composed a new piece for a string quartet in response to the archive, having engaged with Beckett’s notebooks and Matthews’ work on Beckett’s late prose for radio broadcast (E6). This new piece of music was performed in Reading and London in 2019. Parkinson’s new string quartet, including theatrical elements, takes the medium into new territories, and it is his first work in the genre inspired by Beckett’s notebooks. Parkinson attests to the impact of the Creative Fellowship on future direction of his art (E7, E8).

In addition to the success of the individual Fellowships, the scheme has inspired a new mode of arts and archival practice at Trinity College Dublin, which models the Fellowship methodology for a new initiative that brings writers to their Beckett archive. In January 2020, a sold-out event at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) supported by the SBRC further developed links between contemporary writing in Ireland, Beckett’s oeuvre, and the activities of the Creative Fellowships detailed above. “Reactive Practices: An Evening of Artists Responses” brought together writers and visual artists in an event that has already generated further collaborative discussions with IMMA and individual writers and artists – including Laura Fitzgerald (artist), Ashley Taggart (writer), Joanna Walsh (writer), Emma Wolf-Haugh (artist) and Suzanne Walsh (artist/writer). The SBRC is being consulted on plans for Creative Fellowships at Trinity. Commenting on this new development, an Assistant Professor in Irish Writing at Trinity said: “This would not have been possible without [...] the success of the Beckett Creative Fellowships at Reading as a model of creative-critical interaction, with the archives of a canonical literary figure, and the scholarly apparatus established around that figure supporting the production of new writing and artwork” (E9).

B. Making the Beckett collection accessible to local, national and global communities

The creative outputs from McBride, McCrum and Parkinson have generated significant interest from the general public and have opened up the work of Beckett and the collection held at the University of Reading for new audiences. Commentators have noted how these new creative works are “infused” with the spirit of Beckett and are each in their own way “very Beckettian” (E3.) Audience members from “An Evening with Eimear McBride” (Reading, November 2018) and “Reactive Practices: An Evening of Artists Responses” (Dublin, January 2020) were excited by the “variety of approaches” and “the new creative ways” in which artists and practitioners

could work with archival material. Comments focused on the continued relevance of Beckett and the insights that could be gained from exploring how “today’s artists are infused [sic] by former artists” (E10). The SBRC is now looking to appoint further new creative fellows and the SBRC’s initial donor has agreed continued support as a result of the success of the first three creative fellowships.

The SBRC’s Fellowship Programme, inspired by the underpinning research of its members and the materials of the Beckett Archive, has given rise to a suite of creative activities that have enabled the collection, Beckett’s works, and Beckett research to become an asset to new communities; the author’s powerful and significant aesthetics have been engaged in a way that has inspired a new generation of creative practitioners and secured the impact of Beckett’s methods for future artists.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [E1] Mouthpieces and Stirrings Still by Eimear McBride (provided as PDF files)
- [E2] Transcript of interview with McBride (PDF file)
- [E3] Biographical note in McBride’s *Strange Hotel*, interview with *The Guardian* and Twitter comment (PDF file)
- [E4] Radio 4 documentary on Beckett’s last tapes and article for the Observer by McCrum (provided as a PDF file), *Full Moon*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3q2exTpv1o>
- [E5] Interview with Robert McCrum
- [E6] String Quartet by Tim Parkinson <https://youtu.be/5Nk6SB1KmtQ>
- [E7] Tim Parkinson blogpost on the impact of the Creative Fellowship within the Beckett Archive: <https://samuelbeckettcentre.weebly.com/blog/musician-and-composer-tim-parkinson-reflects-on-becketts-work-and-archive> (also provided as a PDF file)
- [E8] Interview with Tim Parkinson
- [E9] Testimonial from Assistant Professor at Trinity College Dublin
- [E10] Audience feedback from Dublin and Reading events