

Institution: Newcastle University		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: The Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts and the Devolution of British Poetry		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009-2020		
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:
Linda Anderson	Professor of Modern English and American Literature	1 October 1979 – 30 September 2020
Mark Byers	Lecturer in Literature	24 October 2016 – present
Jackie Kay	Professor of Creative Writing	1 August 2004 – present
Sinéad Morrissey	Professor of Creative Writing	1 March 2017 – present
Sean O'Brien	Professor of Creative Writing	1 September 2006 – present
Jacob Polley	Professor of Creative Writing	1 August 2015 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>The Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts (NCLA) was established in 2009 in the School of English at Newcastle with a specific objective of building new audiences for poetry and enhancing the cultural life of people in the North East of England. Since 2013, the NCLA has focussed much of its work on shifting the centre of balance of the UK's poetry scene northwards. A significant collaboration in this context has been with the Northumberland-based publishing house, Bloodaxe Books. Through a series of innovative, interdisciplinary research projects, NCLA researchers have (i) preserved, catalogued and curated Bloodaxe's archive, making its material publicly accessible for the first time, and (ii) benefitted Bloodaxe Books by helping the independent poetry publisher position itself more confidently within the global literary marketplace. Second, through the creative practice research of its leading poets, the NCLA has contributed to the cultural regeneration of the North of England and of Scotland as it has been articulated within the national media and daily politics, including Hull City of Culture (2017-2019) and a series of Scottish Government initiatives, including the ground-breaking 'Baby Box'. Through its schedule of live events, readings and performances, and its major annual poetry festival, NCLA has helped establish Newcastle itself as a 'poetry capital' with a gravitational pull that is registered in substantial, and growing, audiences both nationally and internationally.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>The acquisition of the Bloodaxe Books archive by Newcastle University in 2013 provided the main impetus behind the underpinning research outlined below. Bloodaxe is a leading independent publishing house with strong regional ties to the North East, and an international reputation. Established in 1978, it has published over 300 poets, including current English Laureate Simon Armitage, leading UK poets Tony Harrison and Benjamin Zephaniah, and major figures of world poetry, such as Mahmoud Darwish, Miroslav Holub and Nobel Laureate Tomas Tranströmer. The original acquisition comprised 592 boxes of typescripts, editorial work and correspondence, but the collection was conceived of as a 'living archive', with annual accruals thereafter. From the outset, NCLA researchers understood the real and meaningful connections of the archive to the region. Nuancing Philip Larkin's lament, four decades earlier, that many of Britain's richest repositories of contemporary British poetry are now based in the US, NCLA researchers proceeded from the position that 'place matters in relation to archives' where 'links with national and regional cultures are mutually reinforcing' (PUB6).</p> <p>Combining critical and creative practice research, the 'Poetics of the Archive' project (GRANT1) approached the Bloodaxe collection, one of the richest repositories of contemporary poetry in the UK, in ways that challenged conventional understandings of what literary archives are and</p>		

do. The aim was to disrupt the archive as a closed collection, with North East poets and wider public being given access to the papers before they were even catalogued. The project brought together the archivist's process of receiving, sorting and classifying papers with artist responses and users' stated requirements in an act of creative-critical co-production that culminated in a major website which digitised and made publicly available the archive while allowing uniquely creative searches and interactions (**PUB5**). Now recognised as a touchstone of digital innovation, the website has itself been the subject of papers published in prestigious venues including *Digital Humanities Quarterly* (2015) and *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (2017).

As well as being original and significant research in its own right, the project built an intimate knowledge and understanding of Bloodaxe's values and operations, including the identification of Bloodaxe's need for a digital strategy that would allow the company to build engagement with new audiences and remain internationally competitive without relinquishing its strong regional identity. This aim underlay Anderson's Knowledge Transfer Partnership (**GRANT2**), designed specifically to develop Bloodaxe's digital capacity, supplemented by a Collaborative Doctoral Award (**GRANT3**) investigating experimental methods of digital/print hybrid poetry publishing. Co-authored publications from these projects (**PUB6**), featuring essays by Anderson, Byers, O'Brien and others, make the case for poetry archives as sources of inspiration for ongoing creative practice, and a means of expanding and diversifying public engagements with material previously understood as the preserve of literary scholars.

A second key strand of the underpinning research in this case study is an award-winning body of new work by NCLA poets (including a dozen major poetry collections in this REF cycle), much of which addresses the contemporary moment through a distinctively 'peripheral' poetic vision that spans Morrissey's Northern Ireland, Jackie Kay's black Scotland, O'Brien's Hull and Polley's Cumbria. A small, indicative sample is cited here, with a focus on work that has addressed pressing concerns, including the cohesion of the UK in the age of Brexit, the intersection of Britishness with other identities (e.g. Irish, European, Cumbrian, African-Caribbean), and the literary resonance of cultural devolution. O'Brien's *Europa* (**PUB1**) is an elegiac exploration of 'The condition of England [...] set against the backdrop of collective and disparate European identities' (*TLS*, 11 December 2018). Polley's *Jackself* (**PUB2**), winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize, is 'a story sequence of 34 poems set in the phantasmagoric Cumbrian farmland of Lamanby' that 'ventriloquises the Jacks of English folklore' to investigate how 'people are made by places' (*LRB*, 1 June 2017). Morrissey's *On Balance* (**PUB3**), winner of the Forward Prize and of the European Poet of Freedom Award, is 'a breath-taking feat, blending fiction, memoir and history' (*Guardian*, 24 October 2017). Kay's *Bantam* (**PUB4**), her first collection since being appointed Scotland's Makar, reconfigures Scottish and Black history under the lens of public commemoration. These are outputs that renew poetry's capacity to speak in powerful, relevant and urgent ways to contemporary audiences within the wider context of cultural devolution across the UK, supporting the NCLA's mission to place poetry – and poetry in its relationship to place – at the centre of public discourse.

3. References to the research

All outputs can be supplied by Newcastle University upon request, and have been peer-reviewed as 3*/4* via internal and external quality assurance procedures.

PUB1. Sean O'Brien, *Europa* (Picador, 2018)

PUB2. Jacob Polley, *Jackself* (Picador, 2016)

PUB3. Sinéad Morrissey, *On Balance* (Carcanet, 2017)

PUB4. Jackie Kay, *Bantam* (Picador, 2017)

PUB5. Creative-critical research-based digitisation of the Bloodaxe Books Archive:
<http://bloodaxe.ncl.ac.uk>

PUB6. Linda Anderson, Mark Byers and Ahren Warner, eds. *The Contemporary Poetry Archive: Essays and Interventions* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019)

GRANT1. 'The Poetics of the Archive: Creative and Community Engagement with the Bloodaxe Archive'. Linda Anderson (PI). AHRC (AH/L007746/1), GBP475,919 (2013-2015).

GRANT2. Knowledge Transfer Partnership. Linda Anderson (PI). AHRC/Innovate UK in partnership with Bloodaxe Books (509877), GBP21,262 (2016).

GRANT3. 'Creative Digital Interventions into Poetry'. Linda Anderson (supervisor), Peter Hebden (student). AHRC (1953572) (2017-2021).

4. Details of the impact

The NCLA has played a substantial part in the cultural devolution of the British poetry scene during the last decade. We divide this overall impact here into three strands.

1. Building Digital Engagement with Poetry: Bloodaxe Books

Through its pioneering work with archives, NCLA has embedded new digital skills at the Northumberland offices of Bloodaxe, bringing lasting benefits to the company by developing an innovative digital business model that provides (as Bloodaxe's Director puts it) 'overdue attention to poetry production outside the consecrating literary centre of London' (**IMP2**). The 'Poetics of the Archive' project (**GRANT1**) repurposed the Bloodaxe Books Archive as a digital resource for the future. Its principal output was a website (**PUB5**). Its impact has been not merely on its users (4,314 unique page views 2014-2020) but on positioning poetry, and particularly poetry archives, as part of a locally-situated national heritage of international importance; and second, on Bloodaxe Books themselves, where new digital-archival skills are bringing lasting benefits to their evolving business practice. As evidence of its influence on the GLAM sector, the Bloodaxe Archive digital resource has been the subject of a seminar for librarians at the British Library (also livestreamed to Boston Spa) in 2018, and featured twice in design exhibitions at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. The V&A exhibition catalogue *Crafting Our Digital Futures* (2015), praised the Bloodaxe site as a model for 'how archives and libraries ... can be understood as great quarries of raw material of creativity, innovation, and invention' (**IMP1**). Picking up on the regional resonance of the work, the V&A added: 'The Bloodaxe project demonstrates how, just as coal mines provided the fuel for the industrial revolution, so our memories and our shared cultures, preserved in our libraries, archives, galleries and museums and at large in our communities, will be the raw material of our future economy' (**IMP1**).

The archive's post-industrial potential as a quarry of creativity was realised in 2017, when Anderson was awarded an Innovate UK-funded Knowledge Transfer Partnership (**GRANT2**) with Bloodaxe Books to harness the digital possibilities of the publisher's archive through the creation of a series of ebooks, apps and product prototypes that exploited the poetry's intermediality. The legacy of this collaboration was some of the first freely downloadable apps from a poetry publisher, with the number of digitised Bloodaxe poets growing to reach 76 by 2020 (**IMP2**). Along with the Bloodaxe Books Archive website, the Company Director notes that NCLA's digital curation has resulted in 'user figures in their 1000s', placing 'digital technology at the heart of our activities and identity' (**IMP2**).

A further collaboration with Bloodaxe in 2019-20 brought on board The Poetry Society's Young Poet's Network, a digital platform for poets under 25, which placed the Bloodaxe Archive at the heart of mentoring and professional development in the field. Four writing challenges structured around Bloodaxe Archive texts were made available to young poets all over the world, and attracted over 400 entries from 24 different countries. The Director of the Poetry Society noted that the final challenge, coinciding with the COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK and elsewhere, was particularly timely as it 'gave young people the tools to record this difficult and turbulent time and respond to it creatively' (**IMP4**). She described the overall impact of the writing challenges based on the Bloodaxe archive material as 'transformative', because they enable The Poetry Society 'to encourage young people to take their own work seriously, increase their confidence, and prepare them to take a more rigorous critical approach' (**IMP4**). Summarising the step-change resulting from these various collaborations, Bloodaxe's Director adds, 'NCLA has helped equip Bloodaxe, a specialist poetry publisher with a unique regional identity, to lead the sector

nationally during the first decades of the twenty-first century and beyond' in ways that address the 'structural imbalance' of the metropolitan publishing industry (**IMP2**).

2. De-metropolitanising poetry

NCLA poets have used their published and broadcast poetry to address this same 'structural imbalance' most notably through extended collaboration with the BBC (O'Brien; Polley) and the Scottish Parliament (Kay). In 2017, the BBC launched a year-long schedule of programmes to mark Hull's status as the UK's quadrennial City of Culture, an event which, the BBC notes, attracted audiences of over 5,000,000, creating GBP220,000,000 of investment and 800 jobs in the city. The BBC gave particular prominence to O'Brien, as the inaugural poet chosen to launch the event on air, and Polley, as Hull poet in residence, because of their ability to capture a sense of the 'marginal' and to re-animate regional voices and stories in new commissions inspired by their published collections.

O'Brien's 'I, by the Tide of Humber' (BBC Radio 4, 2017) was the first programme to mark Hull's year as City of Culture, with a lyrical homage to Hull that reflects on how the city, its waterscape and landscape, has inspired poets past and present. Featuring a specially commissioned poem, a three-part memory piece, which was also a love song for Hull, its surroundings and their metaphorical resonance, O'Brien reanimated the work of past poets who had made the city their home: Andrew Marvell, Philip Larkin, Stevie Smith and others. The Senior Producer of BBC Radio Documentaries notes: 'The BBC's coverage of Hull City of Culture was extensive during 2017, but the particular value of [O'Brien's] broadcast, and why it was given such prominence in our programming, was the way in which it set the scene for Hull's cultural renaissance by demonstrating how culture, the arts, and poetry in particular, have the capacity to transform locations and the lives of their citizens' (**IMP5**). The impact of O'Brien's work goes beyond the audiences who heard the broadcasts, with a clear transformatory effect on the BBC, and indeed on Hull. As the Senior Producer notes, 'These programmes have not only benefitted the BBC by helping us to fulfil our mission (written into the BBC's Royal Charter) to show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output across the UK and internationally, they have also demonstrably helped us reflect, serve and represent the regions of the UK in supporting and reinvigorating its local economy' (**IMP5**).

Polley's BBC broadcasts for Hull City of Culture were commissioned by the BBC Editor of Audio Drama and Director of the corporation's 'Contains Strong Language' Festival in Hull (2017-2019). Polley was one of the so-called 'Hull 18' poets, positioned by the BBC at 'the heart of the festival'. Since November 2015, Polley has produced more than a dozen programmes for the BBC, many of them drawing on the strikingly performative nature of his prize-winning collection *Jackself*, including two full-length radio dramas *Lamanby* (Radio 4, 2017) and *The Blackwood* (Radio 3, 2018). Other broadcasts by Polley include 'Between the Sea and a Hard Place' (2017) and 'New Lyrical Ballads' (2020): a documentary exploring the West Coast of Cumbria and a meditation on the history and present of the Solway Marsh through Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. According to the BBC Editor, Polley has helped the corporation to realise its remit of engaging more directly with non-metropolitan audiences: 'The work that Polley has done for the BBC has been very important in democratising poetry and reaching new audiences. Polley's representation of place has played a key part in the BBC's ongoing commitment to realign a sense of the North as a place of cultural and historical importance' (**IMP6**).

As National Poet of Scotland (*Makar*, 2016-2021), Kay has also brought poetry into different public settings and made it part of everyday national discourse through vernacular forms that not only complicate racial difference, but stake out their geographical distance from London. She has written and read new poems for the twentieth anniversary of the Scottish Parliament (2019) and for its State Opening (2016), as well as for the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (2017) and the state opening of the Queensferry Crossing by HM the Queen (2017), when Kay's new verse was set in bronze in a specially commissioned 3.5m-wide plaque, commissioned by the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland as a permanent part of the bridge's fabric. Kay's poem, 'Welcome Wee One', sits alongside other 'essentials' for newborns (clothes, equipment, guides, and the box itself as a bed) in the Scottish Baby Box, as part of the

determination, as First Minister Nicola Sturgeon puts it, ‘that every child, regardless of their circumstances, should get the best start in life’ (BBC News, 1 January 2017). By December 2020, the Baby Box, which also doubles as a memory box, or archive, to preserve treasured items, had been delivered to more than 150,000 homes. A Scottish Government evaluation of the initiative revealed that Kay’s poem was the Baby Box component most engaged with by new mothers (97% of 115,000 surveyed: **IMP7**). According to the Scottish Book Trust, ‘Welcome Wee One’ has had particular meaning for families with newborns during the COVID-19 pandemic, as ‘the usual rites of passage [haven’t been] possible’ (**IMP8**). With 15,000 babies born in Scotland between March and December 2020, Kay’s poem in the Baby Box has been ‘especially relevant ... for the parents and carers who haven’t been able to share the joy of the newborn in the usual ways – and for all the grandparents who haven’t met their new grandchildren yet’ (**IMP8**).

3. Programming Live Events: Establishing an Alternative Capital for Poetry

Between October 2014 and the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, the NCLA hosted 150 live events. Since 2015, the NCLA has also run the annual Newcastle Poetry Festival. Now established as one of the 4 main poetry festivals in the UK, the Newcastle Poetry Festival is widely recognised as what Poetry Book Society calls ‘an industry thought-leader’ (**IMP3**). Programming has been driven by the NCLA’s critical and creative research. For example, a poetry symposium has been at the core of each Festival, addressing a theme with contemporary public relevance, and new poems and cross-media collaborations have been commissioned. The Festival has attracted a combined audience of more than 5,000 over 5 years (2015-2020); NCLA events have had a combined audience of 11,560. 573 unique recordings from the festivals are available through the NCLA online archive, with total visits of 47,600. Beyond the numbers, the impact of the NCLA’s work in developing audiences, and driving national conversations about poetry, can be understood from the annual assessments conducted for Arts Council England. They note that ‘the festival...would make a good case against anyone who argues poetry has ... nothing to say about contemporary events’ (Waters, 2017); that ‘the festival provides an important space for the nurturing of a properly national poetry culture’ (Jamal, 2018); and ‘The festival continues to remain at the forefront of thinking about poetry’s position in the UK today, leading the conversation and championing pushing poetry into new spheres and collaborations, executed with NCLA’s academic rigour’ (Colley, 2019) (**IMP9**). Citing Newcastle Poetry Festival’s part in spearheading ‘a resurgence in the form’s popularity’ in the north, *The Bookseller* accordingly identifies Newcastle Poetry Festival as among a handful of recent events that have established the region’s reputation as ‘a “capital” of poetry in the UK’ (28 June 2019).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

IMP1: Andrew Prescott, ‘Being Local and Connected’, *Crafting Our Digital Futures*, V&A exhibition catalogue, V&A Digital Design Weekend, 2015.

IMP2: Testimonial, Founder and Company Director, Bloodaxe Books.

IMP3: Testimonial, Manager, The Poetry Book Society.

IMP4: Testimonial, Director, The Poetry Society.

IMP5: Testimonial, Senior Producer, BBC Radio Documentaries.

IMP6: Testimonial, Editor, BBC Audio Drama.

IMP7: ‘Scotland’s Baby Box – parents’ views on content’, Scottish Government, 2017.

IMP8: Roz Coe, ‘Welcome Wee One: a poem by Jackie Kay’, Scottish Book Trust, 17 December 2020. <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/articles/welcome-all-babies>.

IMP9: Arts Council England evaluation reports on Newcastle Poetry Festival, 2016-2020.