Institution: University of Oxford
Unit of Assessment: 26A – Modern Languages
Title of case study: 'Storming Utopia': an ongoing experiment in diversity, creativity, and community
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Oct 2006–July 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:**
Wes Williams	Professor of French Literature; Director of the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH)	Oct 2006–Present
Richard Scholar	Professor of French and Comparative Literature	Oct 2009–Dec 2018

Period when the claimed impact occurred: Jan 2015–July 2020
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Storming Utopia began as a project with the Pegasus Theatre, Oxford, bringing together French early modern studies with participants' life stories, and the creative ideas of Oxford artists. This generated new thinking about current crises in community by exploring connections between modern debates and the conflictual 'early modern' history of Utopian thought. *Storming Utopia* also provides an inclusive space of encounter, exchange, skills sharing, and professional development. It is an ongoing experiment in diversity, creativity, and community, and has influenced pedagogical and theatrical practice both in the UK and abroad.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

For over a decade, Wes Williams's research has focused on the histories of community and conflict that structured cultural life in the early modern period and on the generative power given to the imagination. These connecting research strands are woven together in *Storming Utopia* where the working hypothesis is that early modern literature contributes a distinct culture of invention and reinvention to the wider history of utopianism; this culture operates according to a principle of 'stormy' relocation and disruption, and continues to have a profound and complex impact on contemporary experience. This hypothesis proved well founded: evidence gathered to this effect informs not only the play devised by the company and scripted by Williams, but also the subsequent research of both Williams and other project partners, most significantly, Richard Scholar, who also played the part of Thomas More in the play.

As Williams' work on travel and early colonisation suggests, all cultures are to a significant extent formed by conflict: travel beyond familiar borders has the effect of revealing ways in which cultures rely on in-groups and out-groups, and commonly seek to perpetuate or to modify the rules of engagement both within and beyond these groups **[R1, R2, R3]**. Utopian thinking is a key component of early writing about the 'New World', evident both in the accounts of travellers such as Columbus, Staden, and Léry, and in their dissemination, mediation, and transformation by More, Rabelais, Ronsard, and Montaigne, right through to Shakespeare and Donne **[R1, R2, R3, R4, R5]**. Utopia also proves pivotal to the imagination of political community both in the early modern period and in the present, as evidenced both by Williams's work **[R1, R2, R3, R6]** and by that of Richard Scholar **[R4, R5]**. Much of their published research focuses on French texts for francophone readers. **Storming Utopia** explored this research into early modern travel narrative and the history of utopian thinking both through direct use, and through practice-based translation in the creation of a

contemporary version of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. This experiment in research by practice involves not only translation from one language to another, but also transposition of themes, characters, situations, and questions between and across centuries, nations, island-communities, and art forms.

Williams's monograph *'Mighty Magic'* **[R6]**, written for an anglophone readership, explores the question of cultural identity and alterity from an adjacent angle, one equally vital to the Storming Utopia project. It traces the determining role of conflict – embodied in the figure of the monster, most saliently here, the twinned figures of Shakespeare's Othello and Caliban – in the constitution of a wide range of early modern 'ideal' communities and spaces: from religious and confessional utopias, through to medical, natural historical, and legal artisans and professors, from political bodies to poetic movements, from fairgrounds to theatres. This work, with its dual focus on the figure of the monstrous Other (racialised, gendered, and pathologised…) and the power of the imagination in the constitution of community has proved central to **Storming Utopia** over its developing life.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1. [Chapter] Wes Williams: 2012, '"L'Humanité du tout perdue?": Early Modern Monsters, Cannibals and Human Souls', in Surekha Davies and Neil Whitehead eds, *History and Anthropology* 23:2, 235–256. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2012.675817

R2. [Chapter, available on request] Wes Williams: 2017, '"Ce n'est point une isle": Montaigne, insulaire ?' in: *Îles et insulaires* (XVIe–XVIIIe siècles), eds Frank Lestringant and Alexandre Tarrête, Paris: PUPS, 127–137. ISBN 979-1023105582

R3. [Chapter, available on request] Wes Williams: 2017, 'Je le vois comme un monstre effroyable à mes yeux' in: *Violence et passion: Rencontres Recherche et Création du Festival d'Avignon*, eds Françoise Lavocat, Catherine Courtet, Mireille Besson and Alain Viala, Paris: CNRS, 129–145. ISBN 978-2271116901

R4. [Journal Article] Richard Scholar; 2013 'De la dispute utopienne à la controverse religieuse: deux querelles signées Thomas More', *Littératures classiques* 81, 37–49. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3917/licla.081.0037

R5. [Chapter, available on request] Richard Scholar: 2015 'The Archipelago Goes Global: Late Glissant and the Early Modern Isolario', in Sansavior, Eva & Scholar, Richard (eds), *Caribbean Globalizations, 1492 to the Present Day*, Liverpool University Press, 33–57. ISBN 978-1781381519

R6. [Authored Book, available on request] Wes Williams: 2011, *Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: 'Mighty Magic'*, Oxford: OUP. ISBN: 9780199577026

Indicators of quality:

Review of R6 in *Modern Philology,* Hampton, Timothy. "Wes Williams Monsters and Their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic." 111(3), Feb 2014, p E316-E318. **"…exemplary for its blending of nuanced close readings and historical analysis with broader discussion of important topics in the humanities."** https://doi.org/10.1086/673350

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Storming Utopia is a research-based knowledge exchange theatre project, and an ongoing experiment in diversity, creativity, and community. At its core is a new community play – a *mash-up* of themes and stories from the early modern period with life experiences of inhabitants of (post-)Brexit Oxford – written by Williams in collaboration with a diverse,

multigenerational cast and crew of over thirty people. Performed, adapted, and translated a number of times, this exercise in practical utopianism generated after-show discussions, films, poems, stories, design projects and teaching practice in schools and other institutions including universities in the UK, Europe, and the US.

Co-produced a new play in partnership with diverse East Oxford community participants empowering them to explore timely research and social questions

Williams worked with Pegasus Theatre's Heads of both Creative Learning and Design and over 100 community members aged 7–75 (including schoolchildren and primary and secondary teachers, professional theatre-makers, and amateur dramatic groups) who responded to invitations in local press and on social media to create a new play. The project engaged a wide range of stakeholders, designing and building the set for versions performed in the UK and Venice. With Williams and Pegasus Theatre's Creative Learning and Design Heads, participants took ownership of and significantly shaped the play, based on their exploration of key research questions: what are the rules governing ideal societies and the laws governing Oxford; what makes somewhere an island; how do you know you belong, and how do know you don't?

Most participants, like successive generations of Oxford immigrants, were based in OX4. Outside the old city of Oxford walls, this post code area includes the large post-war council estates of Blackbird Leys and Wood Farm, and a significant concentration of social and educational deprivation. The research questions' contemporary resonance became increasingly clear. Pegasus Theatre CEO explains: 'Young people considered what in their city contributes to their well-being and happiness, and what made them feel dis-empowered or excluded. From these ideas they explored other societies around the world, now and historically, and better understood contemporary political and cultural issues.' **[S1]**

Storming Utopia engaged participants in reflecting on how literature can be used to think politically, providing more complex understanding of the at once colonial and internal history of Europe as a political and cultural idea. Participants under 18 felt the show provided them with a stronger lived sense of the power of theatre-making. Isabel, 16, noted, "The project was sort of an opportunity for younger voices to be heard. I think I was changed by talking about the future of the country and the past of the country and getting a sort of better understanding of where Britain had come from and where it was going" **[S3]**.

Provided a space of encounter and exchange for people from a range of backgrounds and ages

The experimental research process that went into making the play assembled a diverse, multigenerational group; it resulted in a changed sense of Oxford in relation to migration, diversity, and the value of collective creative work. The CEO of Pegasus Theatre commented: "This project embodied perfectly the principle of creative exchange between cultures, classes, generations, professional artists and non-professionals. It gave young people and arts professionals from Pegasus access to places and ideas in Oxford they might not normally access and did the same with Oxford academics and wider audiences." **[S1]**.

Storming Utopia has been performed, with after-show discussions, at four Oxford venues including as a gala opener of the Oxford Festival of the Arts—a prized 'platform' within Oxford's cultural economy) **[S4a]**. More than 1,600 people (from 9 to 65+) attended these performances and other project activities which shaped and informed attitudes. The Oxford Culture Review highlighted the project after the Ashmolean Live Friday, "…actors hid themselves amongst the audience before emerging to deliver their lines, much to the crowd's unwitting delight" **[S5]**.

The space of encounter built bridges across Oxford's political geography and proved transformative for the cast who enjoyed: "Getting to know different people and their ideas about complex issues and the very comfortable, safe and encouraging environment in which this was done" **[S2]**; "It opened up new ways of looking at places I'd seen many times before: 'my' Caribbean archipelago, the Oxford Archipelago, physical islands and imagined islands." **[S4c]**; "Working inter-generationally with people from different backgrounds and lives."**[S2]**.

Amongst the participants, a recently married couple hoped to find an opportunity for the wife to learn English creatively; she did and gained the confidence to apply for–and secure–a job. The husband's story of childhood migration through warzones leading to what he imagined as the Utopia of Oxford became central to the show as it developed. The couple's intense engagement with the group taught performers and audiences about racism, aggression towards others, and also solidarity and community within their city. **[S6]**

Storming Utopia provided a space for exploration for younger members: a 'school refuser' could explain their choices, while experiencing what it means to work collectively in community; another developed their 'voice' through writing exercises and is now a published poet; another is studying drama at university and has worked as a tutor/mentor on the National Youth Theatre Summer School. **[S2, S6]** Life experiences integrated into the play as first-person narrative, or through the shape given to characters like Caliban or Miranda made striking sense of experiences of confession and disavowal, misrecognition and compassion. This proved the pertinence of the project's hypothesis: the continuing contemporary force of the power of the imagination embodied in early modern Utopian thinking.

Influenced pedagogical and theatrical practice and engagement (inter)nationally.

The project model has been adopted in Europe and a partnership for capacity building established in North America. After Oxford, the play was performed on an island in Venice in a dual-language version accompanied by a film made with a local primary school on related themes of utopia, diversity, and island-living. Approximately 250 people attended the performance and engaged in a lively post-show debate. **[S7]**

The model provided a self-reflexive space to create social agency through the history of utopian thinking and the utopian project of theatre-making, offering a framework for training, capacity building, and professional development for those seeking to engage community partners with Humanities research. The director of a collaborative partnership with Ontario's Shakespeare Festival wrote: 'I just had a quick visit to your **Storming Utopia** site. What you've done and what you are doing is wonderful and exciting. I think there is a great deal in your project that we have to learn from and many possible lines of connection.' **[S10]**

Outreach also extended into primary education. Williams collaborated with East Oxford Primary School (EOPS) and ran discussion workshops with students and staff. EOPS' Head Teacher notes that **Storming Utopia** connected staff and students by providing an inclusive space of cultural encounter and linguistic exchange. 'Two short films emerged from these discussions. The pupils and TAs involved benefitted both by exploring ideas alongside professors and students from Oxford University and by gaining confidence in having their own lives and languages represented on film.' **[S9]** The feelings of representation and inclusion fostered by **Storming Utopia** empowered students to engage in open dialogue with each other and with the community at large. 'A number of [EOPS] pupils…took part in [an] event at the Ashmolean, where they could see their faces on screen, hear their stories being shared with different communities in Oxford, and talk confidently to [each] other about what it means to contribute to creative work in a university and a museum.' **[S8]**

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

S1. Email statement from the CEO of Pegasus Theatre, 26 September 2019.

S2. Cast member statements and evaluation responses.

S3. Quote obtained from 'Cast Reflections' video on Storming Utopia website https://torch.ox.ac.uk/storming-utopia-cast-reflections-1. Time stamp: 01:54.

S4. Storming Utopia website details
a.   Detailing events and appearances https://torch.ox.ac.uk/storming-utopia#tab-825686
b.   Analytics report of 'Storming Utopia' TORCH website
c.   Transcript of interview
       http://storming-utopia.seh.ox.ac.uk/index.php/2017/07/04/crossing-the-borders-of-utopia/

S5. Shannon Wilson, 'Review: "FRIGHTFriday – Hopes and Fears" at the Ashmolean Museum', *The Oxford Culture Review*, 15 January 2017. https://theoxfordculturereview.com/2017/01/15/review-frightfriday-hopes-and-fears-at-the-ashmolean-museum/.

S6. 'Storming Utopia. A Tempestuous Experiment In Practical Utopianism. Research project, theatre project, & ongoing experiment in community.' Impact Report by Freelance Director, Facilitator, Practitioner and Arts Project Manager, December 2020.

S7. Knowledge Exchange Fellowship Evaluation Report, 11 December 2017.

S8. Video of Storming Utopia at East Oxford Primary School (EOPS), published 6 July 2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FM6Ap6Sj9Ic.

S9. Statement from Head of East Oxford Primary School, 7 August 2020.

S10. Email from Professor at McGill University, Associate of the Ontario Shakespeare Festival, 10 December 2018.