

Institution: University of Wolverhampton		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Writing the Black Country: Changing perceptions and reimagining marginalised communities through cultural networking and public engagement		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2001 - 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:
Dr Lisa Blower	Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing	2019 - Present
Dr Aidan Byrne	Senior Lecturer in English Literature	2008 - Present
Dr Robert Francis	Lecturer in Creative Writing	2019 - Present
Professor Sebastian Groes	Professor of English Literature	2018 - Present
Dr Paul McDonald	Senior Lecturer	1994 - 2019
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>For decades, negative stereotypes about the post-industrial Black Country as an overlooked, one-dimensional place of poverty and deprivation misrepresented the region in the public eye. Research by the University of Wolverhampton has impacted positively on the national and international visibility, reputation and reach of the region's fascinating socio-cultural complexities. Through collaborations with 28 cultural, commercial and media partners, libraries, and festivals, we have established a nationwide network for readers, writers, publishers and cultural organisations. This has resulted in improvements to the visitor experience of cultural institutions whilst (in)directly benefiting regional economic prosperity. The research has contributed to a transformative cultural renaissance that helps push the region towards a reinvigorated, more prosperous future.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>The underpinning research by the Writing the Black Country team comprises novels, an essay and a ground-breaking multidisciplinary edited collection. The research makes use of original multi-disciplinary methodologies drawing on disciplines including literary studies, creative writing, (neuro)psychology, history, sociology, and linguistics. All research has two interrelated foci. Firstly, it explores how the socio-cultural and economic heritage of the post-industrial Black Country fits in with the wider concerns of a rapidly changing nation that needs to address twenty-first century challenges including globalisation and Brexit. Secondly, it investigates the ways in which literature queries the effects of this post-industrial condition on individual cultural identity with a view to telling new stories that, though rooted in West Midlands traditions, open up new, positive futures for the population of this overlooked region.</p> <p>Researchers within the unit provide original and distinctive views of Black Country culture in their work. In 2001, McDonald published the first instalment of his trilogy of Black Country novels, <i>Surviving Sting</i>, followed by <i>Kiss Me Softly Amy Turtle</i> (2004), and <i>Do I Love You?</i> (Tindall Street Press - now part of Serpent's Tail, 2008, [R1]). The research for these novels included interviews with locals and an interrogation of the large corpus of primary and secondary sources that</p>		

document Black Country history. McDonald's novels were also shaped by his research for the first substantial critical study of Black Country writers, *Fiction from the Furnace* (Sheffield UP, 2002). Expanding the reach of the unit, Byrne's expertise in post-industrial Welsh fiction is evidenced in his essay on the haunting of the Welsh working-class novel [R2] which shows how extreme politics have left traces of trauma in the physical landscape and the collective consciousness of generations of marginalised, working class communities outside Little Britain.

Francis' work links markers of regional identity with class, race, gender and sexuality, drawing on local history and archive materials, interviews and critical study. Francis' novel *Bella* (Wild Pressed Books, 2020, [R3]) offers an original investigation of place-identity in relationship to dialect, cultural history, psychogeography and local legend. Similarly, research by the critically acclaimed Blower for her novel *Pondweed* (Myriad, 2020, [R4]), an episodic journey from Stoke-on-Trent to Wales via the Black Country by elderly working-class protagonists reflecting on authority in Britain after Brexit, continues her exploration of the existing canon of working-class texts and its relationship to gender and sexuality through interviews, archival research and theoretical assessment.

The trajectory of the team's increasingly sophisticated research culminated in the unique and distinctive critical-creative investigation of the ways in which underexplored senses such as smell, taste and touch are involved in the formation of cultural history and collective memory in communities. *Smell, Memory, and Literature in The Black Country* (Palgrave, 2021, [R5]) brings together interdisciplinary analyses of the relationship between history, creative writing, linguistics, neuroscience and psychology research resulting in the formulation of a Black Country Poetics.

By linking with regional cultural institutions, our research can be seen to further the awareness and understanding of the Black Country and its culture in order to benefit both the regional community, the cultural sector itself, and visitors to the region.

3. References to the research

The following publications have all been peer reviewed. R1 was reviewed in *The Times* and *The Telegraph*, amongst others. *Times Literary Supplement* noted that McDonald's "prose is refreshing, surprising and comfortable in its own lucid, unpretentious skin". R4 was reviewed in 10 venues of note, including the *Press Reader* and *New Welsh Review* where Mandy Sutter notes that these "set pieces are brilliantly done".

R1. McDonald, P. (2008) *Do I Love You?* (Birmingham: Tindal Street Press).

R2. Byrne, A. and Sheppard, L. (2017) 'A Critical Minefield: The Haunting of the Welsh Working-Class Novel', in Goodridge, J. and Keegan, B. (eds.) *A History of British Working-Class Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 385-397 (REF 2 Output).

R3. Francis, R.M. (2020) *Bella* (Hull: Wild Pressed Books) (REF 2 Output).

R4. Blower, L. (2020) *Pondweed* (Oxford: Myriads Editions) (REF 2 Output).

R5. Groes, S. and Francis, R.M. (eds.) (2021) *Smell, Memory and Literature in The Black Country* (London and New York: Palgrave) (<http://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57212-9>) (Delayed Output).

4. Details of the impact

Our aim for this REF assessment period has been to bring Black Country research to national and international prominence, to both open up imaginative, positive futures for the Black Country, and to help the public revise negative prejudices in their perception of the West Midlands. We have done this by building engagement capacity; growing the quality and quantity of collaborations; informing, curating and programming policies of our partners, and contributing to economic

benefit. This strategy has achieved the following impacts on creativity, culture and society, and understanding learning and participation [I]:

I1. Enhancements to cultural preservation and Interpretation through shaping the Wolverhampton Literature Festival

Initiated by Byrne and supported with in-kind support from the University of Wolverhampton (UoW), the creation of the City of Wolverhampton Council's Art's Council funded Wolverhampton Literature Festival (WoLF) has benefitted the public by providing access to performances by writers and public figures since 2017. WoLF has run four times and attracted 15,000 visitors in total. The events are sponsored by local media (especially the *Express & Star* newspaper) who also provide extensive coverage of the events. The events were held at various venues throughout the Black Country including Bantock House, Slade Rooms and the Wolverhampton Art Gallery (WAG), boosting engagement with these locations whilst bringing economic benefits to the hosting organisations and surrounding communities. WoLF showcases the team's Black Country research through at least two events annually, many of which have a strong focus on immigrant identity, and has therefore informed programming practices of the festival. Examples are Niall Griffiths' *Broken Ghost* performance in Wolverhampton's Central Library (27.1.18, attendance 35), Kerry Hadley-Pryce's *Psychogeography of the Black Country* event (31.1.20, attendance 40) and award-winning poets Roy MacFarlane's and Liz Berry's sold-out event at Wolverhampton Library (2.2.19, attendance 40) where Berry read a poem created for the *Snidge Scrumplin'* project, 'Wolves Library, 1980s'. The *Express & Star* called the performances "[d]azzling, intuitive, and a perfect representation of the Black Country".

The festival and associated ongoing creative writing competitions and events (also for families and children) have established a new relationship between experts in the field and a public which had previously been considered hard to reach by carefully balancing expertise, creative production and public participation. Collaboration between the university, schools and local media helped to build links between these institutions and their publics in pursuit of knowledge exchange and cultural enrichment. The direct beneficiary of the Festival is the West Midlands literary scene (including writers, creatives, publishers and other festivals), which is supported by a mutually beneficial network that nurtures and promotes regional culture to (inter)national audiences. Our collaboration with the Writing the West Midlands network is one important example of how regional networks have created a resilient framework for writers and the public [C1]. Indirectly, the regional public have also benefited from access to live encounters with writers from across Britain [C2].

I2. Developing new methods of audience engagement to benefit cultural tourism and contribute to the quality of the tourist experience

The team forged closer ties with the Black Country Living Museum (BCLM) and the Black Country Studies Centre (BCSC) to further our shared aims. Through project meetings about the role of the senses (especially olfaction) in cultural memory for the organisation of the *Snidge Scrumplin'* experiments (2018 and 2019) and the *Making Sense of the Black Country* walk (2019), the team directly informed BCLM professionals' curation and conceptualisation of the Museum's spaces as well as programming practices. Our partnership with the BCLM has informed the Museum's thinking about the role of the senses in creative storytelling for the successful submission of a GBP23 million bid for the National Lottery. The *Forging Ahead* programme "will use real things, real people and real stories to engage and inspire visitors, of all ages, to learn about the Black Country's heritage, its impact on the world and its relevance today".

Our research into the senses, storytelling, memory and history to create an immersive audience experience has shaped the creation of a new 1940s-60s town and a Learning Space on BCLM's premises. The research thus contributed to an enhanced heritage experience for the Museum's 300,000 annual visitors as well as to enhancements to (cultural) heritage preservation and interpretation [C3]. The public has also benefitted through the joint establishment of the BCSC in 2019 by BCLM and UoW. Drawing partly on our network of regional cultural organisations, the Centre offers public engagement events, access to archives and study opportunities to enhance

accessibility of knowledge about the Black Country whilst enabling (re-)interpretation. The Centre has hosted 10 events at the BCLM since its launch in November 2019, with events by Francis, Hadley-Pryce and Stuart Connor, contributors to *Smell, Memory and Literature in The Black Country*. Working closely with the Centre, together we “raise aspirations and educational attainment by engaging individuals, families and schools across the Black Country, making learning accessible, informative and fun” [C3].

13. Generating new ways of thinking that influence the audience reach of Black Country culture and benefit the economy of the region

Our activities have brought economic benefit to cultural institutions and other stakeholders, particularly through the collaboration with WoLF on events which have increased footfall of 15,614 people in total to the Wolverhampton's city centre and various collaborating venues since 2017. These activities brought in substantial revenue from ticket sales, catering facilities, book sales and associated expenditure in venues and retail companies across the Black Country, including a sold-out headline event with Groes and Will Self at WoLF in 2018 (1.2.18, 150 attendees paying GBP7 resulting in GBP1,050 revenue).

Our collaborations with WAG, BCLM and literary festivals (including on 7 Being Human Festival events [C4]) have led to the areas of Birmingham, Shrewsbury, Stourbridge and Walsall benefitting economically through increased footfall. For example, the ‘Making Sense of the Black Country’ walk utilised AHRC-funds to employ local companies including a bakery (who produced Black Country foodstuffs for the *Snidge Scrumpin’* experiments), and a coach company (to drive participants to venues to assure accessibility), while we have also paid fifteen writers for their performances at our events. Our outreach activities have brought further economic benefit to publishers including Jonathan Cape and smaller, independent publishers such as Tindall Street (Birmingham – now part of Serpent’s Tail); Wild Pressed Books (Hull); Smokestack Books (Ripon); and Myriads Editions (Oxford). This engagement with non-London based publishers is a strategy by our team in order to counter geographical bias; we promote ‘other’ voices and contribute to an inclusive, diverse world of publishing. Groes also worked with eBay on their 2019 grassroots *Home Grown Retail Revival* programme [C5] stimulating local businesses by organising a sensory research event in their pop-up shop in Wolverhampton city centre (24.5.19, attendance 20) [C6]. In short, the team has not only shown how to promote their research across the nation, but their entrepreneurial acumen has benefitted many stakeholders in the area also [C5].

14. Reshaping Public Perception of the Black Country and its Culture

The team has challenged and dismantled stigmas about the West Midlands through public engagement events both regionally, nationally and internationally. Within the impact period, 2,244 people were reached through 64 events, of which McDonald contributed to 20 - with one highlight being his public discussion of Black Country identities and (immigrant) cultures with Sathnam Sanghera at the Wolverhampton Literature Festival (28.1.19, attendance 100) [C7]. Francis has also presented his research on queer Black Country identities at 18 regional events, including a sold-out TEDxWolverhampton talk (6.7.2019, attendance 80; views 310) and an event for Artsfest (UoW’s festival organised by the School of Arts) with Liz Berry on ‘Dialect and Poetry (16.12.20, attendance 39), where one participant said: “I really loved it - it made me re-evaluate where I grew up and how I understood it” [C8]. National events include Blower’s *Common People* event at the Birmingham Literature Festival (10.10.19, attendance 70) and at the Myriads Editions Literary Salon (10.12.20, attendance 117).

Groes’ and Francis’ exploration of the relationship between olfaction and memories in a place-specific context was presented to the public through a series of *Snidge Scrumpin’: Mapping Smell, and Memory in the Black Country* experiments which started regionally in Dudley (22.11.18, attendance 47); Wolverhampton (23.11.18, attendance 27); Wolverhampton eBay event (24.5.19, attendance 20); and Birmingham (11.10.19, attendance 35) before expanding both nationally and internationally – in London (Being Human Festival [BHF] Showcase event 2018 and 2019: attendance 87 and 70 respectively); Amsterdam, Netherlands (23.10.29, attendance 33) and

Sibiu, Romania (8.11.2019, attendance 52). Through these interactive events, Black Country residents were empowered and gained a fresh perspective on their immediate surroundings. As one local said: it's "hard not to think of social progress in last years, and need to defend gains made" whilst others were re-engaging with their local culture: "will look out for other events that promote heritage/poetry/art + local cultures" [C9]. At the Romanian event, one attendee noted that "it made me think about the ways olfactory senses affected our ability to bring back memories" [C10].

Regionally, audience engagement with the research has led to an increase in social connectedness, as well as sparking 'light bulb' moments that afforded locals a renewed sense of pride. Events for BHF have contributed to this impact: in 2019, nearly 20 Wolverhampton colleagues reached 315 members of the public and six more events reached 276; and, in 2020, four events reaching 202. Highlights include *Warhol in Wolverhampton* (20.11.20, attendance 82) and an exploration of memories of regional immigrant textile workers in *Overlooked Overlookers* (20.11.19, attendance 100). Of our BHF sensory walk *Making Sense of the Black Country* (23.11.19, attendance 54), one participant noted: "The Black Country Walk was a brilliant, stimulus-packed experience of the area with references to its history, geology and language" [C9].

Participants from outside the region have also been impacted by the research. One said: "I don't really know this part of the Country very well but feel like I know it a bit more now!" [C8] Events Curator and Manager of the BHF Dr Michael Eades joined the walk and, a year later, Tweeted about having fond memories of "the amazing walk (+canal boat voyage) [...] through the liminal spaces of the Black Country" [C2].

In short, feedback evidences that Black Country locals have experienced higher levels of positive affect and self-esteem because of our stimulator events whilst we have drawn new audiences to the area for cultural exploration.

The overall impact of the research has been to expand our presence in the popular imagination and de-stigmatise perception of the Black Country within the West Midlands and beyond. Our new partnerships have established Wolverhampton as a significant place for creative-critical exploration of regional culture and hub of literary endeavours.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

C1. Contact details for the Chief Executive, Writing West Midlands

C2. Tweet by the Festival Curator and Manager, Being Human Festival, 22.11.20, (<https://twitter.com/DrMichaelEades/status/1330517865129238528>)

C3. Joint testimonial from the Director of Programmes at the Black Country Living Museum and the Director of Access and Lifelong Learning at the Black Country Studies Centre.

C4. Contact details for the Festival Curator and Manager, Being Human Festival

C5. Contact details for the Chief Executive, Black Country Chamber of Commerce

C6. BBC news story, 'eBay small businesses pop-up shop opens in Wolverhampton', 11.5.19, (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-birmingham-48227589>)

C7. Sathnam Sanghera at the Wolverhampton Literary Festival - review and pictures, *Express and Star*, 28 January 2017, (<https://www.expressandstar.com/entertainment/2017/01/28/sathnam-sanghera-wolverhampton-literary-festival-review/>)

C8. Collated feedback forms from *Snidge Scrumpin'* events

C9. Verbatim comments from participants at Francis' events and workshops

C10. Contact details for the Manager Arts and Culture, Wolverhampton Art Gallery