

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: York St John University</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 29 (English Language and Literature)</p>
<p>Title of case study: Impact of theoretical and practice-based research on Creative Writing and the nature of creativity</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This case study describes the impact of two poetry collections authored by Dr Abi Curtis, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing and English Literature. The research explored and disseminated in two journal articles is intrinsically linked to the two poetry collections, which are practice-based explorations of an ongoing body of research. The research conducted in the two academic articles has had a direct impact on the practice-based work – the two poetry collections. These, in turn, have had impacts on the reading public, other artists, and students in different disciplines.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Dr Curtis’ underpinning research is concerned with the nature of creativity, its relationship to theoretical frameworks, in particular psychoanalysis, and the exploration of these concepts in both practice-based (fictional, poetic) and essayist modes. She is concerned with how theory and creativity interact and inform one another, how they can produce new forms of writing, and how in-depth exploration in various written modes might ultimately impact teaching practice in the field of Creative Writing.</p> <p>The two peer-reviewed journal articles explore the complexities of Creative Writing pedagogy and theoretical considerations of metaphor and creativity respectively. The article ‘Re-thinking the unconscious in creative writing pedagogy’ (R1) problematizes and interrogates an understanding of the unconscious in the creative writing process with particular focus on the academic, higher education context. It explores creative writing teaching practices and text-book culture as well as forwarding a more sophisticated teaching model through detailed analysis of relevant psychoanalytic concepts. The second journal article, ‘Mushrooming: Resistance and Creativity in Sigmund Freud and Emily Dickinson’ (R2) is a detailed theoretical account of the use of metaphor in Freud’s extensive body of work, as well as an exploration of the nature of metaphor through various close-readings and critical perspectives. It brings together the work of thinkers such as Slavok Žižek, Shoshana Felman, Mary Jacobus, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. This ongoing interest in the relationship between psychoanalysis and literary production began during Curtis’ AHRC-funded doctoral studies completed in 2007 and has continued into the present.</p> <p>As well as underpinning these theoretical papers, this research also influences Curtis’ creative output, as reflected in two poetry collections published in 2009 and 2012 (R3, R4). The poetry is a practice-based form of exploring these research interests. Both poetry collections have also included extensive research into historic and scientific ideas, an attention to poetic form and experimentation, and some of the work has resulted from and fed into fruitful collaborations with artists and musicians. Curtis’ approach to researching the poetic projects reflects this interdisciplinary outlook. For example, a poem in the second collection involves research at The Natural History Museum in London, including consultation with a curator at the Darwin Centre and an artist who works with its artefacts. The poetry collection also engages with theoretical texts, such as Gaston Bachelard’s <i>The Poetics of Space</i> and Sigmund Freud’s meditations on ‘The Uncanny’. The aim of both forms of output is to interrogate and challenge the boundaries of the discipline of Creative Writing, a subject becoming increasingly popular as an area for academic study, which, as such, requires a rigorous approach, both in its theorization and its practice. Curtis’ research has impact on teaching practices and on audiences and readers of the work.</p>

3. References to the research

- R1 Curtis, A. (2009). Re-thinking the Unconscious in Creative Writing Pedagogy. *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 6, 2, 105 – 116. [Listed in REF2]
- R2 Curtis, A. (2013). Mushrooming: Resistance and Creativity in Sigmund Freud and Emily Dickinson. *Angelaki: The Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 18, 2, 29-44. [Listed in REF2]
- R3 Curtis, A. (2009). *Unexpected Weather*. Cromer: Salt Publishing. [Listed in REF2]
- R4 Curtis, A. (2012). *The Glass Delusion*. Cromer: Salt Publishing. [Listed in REF2]

4. Details of the impact

The research underpinning the poetry collections (R3, R4) includes the theoretical ideas explored in both R1 and R2. There are therefore strong links between the theoretical and practice-based research. In-depth research into both the nature of creativity and the complexities of metaphorical language, explored in these research papers, directly influenced the evolution of Curtis' creative practice. Both creative outputs are concerned with research into heritage, history, scientific and eco-critical ideas, as well as experimenting with formal and linguistic conventions within poetry. Their impact on the wider community is reflected in their uptake by general readers through book and e-book sales (approx. 400 units) and attendance at festival performances, as well as their influence on other artists and use in pedagogical environments. Curtis' work has been read and discussed at the Barbican Library (2012), Bridlington Festival (2011), Nottingham Trent University (2011), The Troubadour (2011), York Literature Festival (2011), The Betsy Trotwood (2011), Chichester University (2010), Sussex University (2009), the Poetry Society's Poetry Café (2009), and Stanza Festival (2008). Production of the poetry has involved collaboration with (mutual impact on) other artists including Julian Broughton (musician at Sussex University), Alice Shirley (independent artist) and Jon Ablett (artist and curator in the Darwin Centre at The Natural History Museum).

The testimonials below demonstrate the impact of Curtis's poetry in these contexts:

Julian Broughton, composer:

"To date (August 2013), I have set six poems [to music], using a variety of techniques. The impact of Curtis's poetry has been significant: I have had to think of new ways of making musical settings work... The two most recent settings bring together A Power Cut (from Curtis's earliest collection, *Humbug*) and Poltergeist (from her latest, *The Glass Delusion* [...]). The two are to be performed in sequence as *Shadow Play*. I had to invent a musical idiom that would reflect the rather dark atmosphere of these restless poems with their pungent humour. [...] [T]he experience of setting Curtis's work has influenced other creative activity, for example when I set Peter Abbs's poem The Long Negation (2011) for a combination of Speaker, Alto voice, and accompanying ensemble." [E2]

Jon Ablett, Squid Curator, Natural History Museum:

"The broad scope of the Natural History Museum collections lends itself to analyses extending beyond the borders of science. The NHM is always keen to use the collections in new and interesting ways in order to reach the largest possible audience to demonstrate the importance of the collections, the scientific research that goes on in the institution and to adopt new perspectives on our collections.

The work that Abigail Curtis produced combined with the Alice Shirley's squid drawing was a perfect example of this type of collaborative, interdisciplinary work. It highlights a museum specimen, in a way which would not usually be done at the museum by NHM staff, to inspire and engage both academic and general interest audiences. I also used the example of Abigail Curtis' work in a talk I gave [at the Natural Sciences Collections Association conference 2012] on the different uses of museum specimens." [E3]

Unexpected Weather (R3)

The public impact of this collection has been considerable, as evidenced by its recognition in 2008 through the award of Salt Publishing's inaugural Crashaw Prize, a publishing prize for debut collections. The prize judges' statement speaks to the impact of this output beyond academia: "We need new writers — sometimes to entertain and surprise us, sometimes to console us, sometimes to disturb and challenge us. These books do just that, each in their own unique way. [...] Despite some claims of marginality for the art, poetry continues to have a lasting purchase on the mind and perhaps even the conscience of us all. We especially need it now." [E4, from a report in *The Guardian*, demonstrating the impact of Dr Curtis' creative output and its national reach.]

The collection garnered numerous positive reviews in poetry journals and on Amazon. Whilst journals might be seen as more legitimate places to 'review' books, Amazon user reviews present a truly non-academic indicator of impact, where the public audience for poetry is able to give its views. Some examples of both kinds of review are given below.

Journal, Web and Print Reviews:

- "I'd argue that the poems themselves are so unexpectedly fresh and cunning in composition that they're a shock to a usually tepid British poetry scene. They could well bring in new poetry fans, and reinspire old ones." Fictavia blog, 2012
- "I have discovered a book of wonderful light: real, surreal, atmospheric, exotic and alien...It is without doubt the most exhilarating collection of poetry that I have read this year." Graham Burchell, 2009 *Acumen*, Ember Press
- "This is striking, original poetry." Pam Thompson, 2009 *Stride Magazine*
- "Because it's not immediately anxious to please, its pleasures reveal themselves through a longer engagement, and they are serious, unsettled and unsettling pleasures." Julia Bird, 2009, *Poetry London*
- "Curtis's imagination is large enough to allow History in as well as the stuff of her own life. This is an important quality for a young poet to have and greatly increases the breadth and depth of subject matter she might tackle in the future." Kevin Higgins, 2010 *Eyewear*.

Amazon Reviews:

- "This is a beautiful book. Curtis's poetry is by turns wonderfully perceptive, delicate, tough, quirky, funny, poignant and haunting. [...] [Y]ou never know which way a Curtis poem is going to go. Nowhere is that perhaps more neatly encapsulated than in the unexpected context in which the title-phrase of this collection appears."
- "This is a fantastic debut collection. It's lyrical yet quirky, sharp yet tender. It is beautifully crafted and a joy to read."

The Glass Delusion (R4)

This collection was a winner of the prestigious Society of Authors Somerset Maugham Award, which is awarded to writers under 35 for a single work in any genre. Past winners include Zadie Smith, William Fiennes and Sarah Waters. The award is judged by a panel of writers. The judges in 2013 were journalist Bidisha, non-fiction author William Fiennes and novelist and journalist Benjamin Markovits. The judges of the award said the following in their report: 'A stunning collection of fierce, rugged & muscular new poetry.' [E5]

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Below are several endorsement statements from poets written at the time of publication:

- “These highly imaginative scenarios have the jubilation of discovery being made on the hoof. The poems are daring, wondrous and unexpectedly funny. Reading Curtis is like being blown offwards by a whisper.” Daljit Nagra
- “If Abi Curtis’s first collection plotted a course through myths both personal and legendary, *The Glass Delusion* wanders off from the breadcrumb trail altogether and finds its own way home through the forest of our collective unconscious. Reading her is to be reminded of the mystery of every living creature, to awake from your own delusions to find that reality is even stranger.” Luke Kennard
- “These poems playfully and tenderly blur the border between fact and fantasy, imbuing true stories with a melancholy magic and establishing fables which feel all too true.” Antony Dunn
- “Tender, surprising, funny and sad, the poems of *The Glass Delusion* demonstrate a range of preoccupations, passions and interests unique in contemporary poetry. In its fascination with the who (wittily explored in ‘Marrying Doctor Who’) and the what (the quiddity of a giant squid in the stunning poem, ‘Squiddity’), with history and the everyday, Abi Curtis’s poetry has a strange beauty, a precision and reserve reminiscent of Elizabeth Bishop. This is a remarkable volume.” Nicholas Royle, author of *The Uncanny*

Both poetry collections have had an impact on the wider reading public, as well as being judged merit-worthy by fellow writers within writing communities such as the Society of Authors.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- E1 Salt Publishing: <http://blog.saltpublishing.com/2008/12/19/the-winners-of-the-2008-crashaw-prize/>
- E2 Testimonial from a School Associate of the School of Media, Film & Music, University of Sussex.
- E3 Testimonial from the Curator of Non-Marine Mollusca & Cephalopods, Department of Life at the Natural History Museum.
- E4 Crashaw Prize (Guardian article): <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/dec/19/crashaw-prize-winners>
- E5 Somerset Maugham Award: <http://www.societyofauthors.org/somerset-maugham>