

<b>Institution: University of Kent</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 29 – English Language and Literature</b>
<b>Title of case study: Creating a Contemporary Poetry Scene: Sounds New Poetry, Free Range, and Wise Words</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Based on a common research interest in the collaborative poetic of the New York School, and a commitment to the public value of poetry, University of Kent poets have created a poetry scene of national and international significance. Together they founded the innovative poetry festival <i>Sounds New Poetry</i>, which led to the award-winning performance series <i>Free Range</i>. <i>Sounds New Poetry</i>'s significance lies in its creation and intellectual enrichment of new audiences for poetry and its advancement of the creative practice of major musicians and poets through cross-media collaborations. Building on the achievement of <i>Sounds New Poetry</i>, the Arts Council-funded <i>Wise Words</i> enabled PGCE students to take contemporary poetry to 'out of mainstream' groups. The programme extended the reach of the festival by changing pedagogy within regional PGCE practice and enriching the experience of users from a range of community education groups.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Since the appointment of <b>David Herd</b> in 1997 (Professor 2010-), the School of English has made a series of strategic appointments to consolidate research strength in the area of modern poetry. <b>Herd</b>, <b>Patricia Debney</b> (Lecturer, 2004-2009; Senior Lecturer, 2009-), <b>Simon Smith</b> (Lecturer 2009-2013; Senior Lecturer, 2013-), and <b>Nancy Gaffield</b> (Lecturer in English Language, 2003-2012; Lecturer in School of English, 2012-) share a longstanding research interest in the collaborative poetic of the New York School. As critics and poets they have developed the aesthetic legacies of that collaborative poetic. In their individual research projects and collectively as members of the Centres for Modern Poetry and Creative Writing, they have explored the public value of innovative poetic work.</p> <p>This collective research has underpinned the impact in three ways. First, it has enabled University of Kent poets to determine how a new regional audience for innovative poetry can be created. Second, it has guided the <i>Sounds New Poetry</i> policy of commissioning cross-artistic collaborations, which have led to changes in creative practice. Third, it has informed the way poetry has been presented to users of out-of-mainstream groups through <i>Wise Words</i>. The individual contributions to this collective underpinning research are as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In his AHRB-funded monograph, <i>Enthusiast! Essays on Modern American Literature</i> (2007) [2.1], <b>Herd</b> explored the question of cultural circulation in the work of six American writers, including New York School poets Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler. Building on his earlier study, <i>John Ashbery and American Poetry</i> (2000) [2.2], which developed a theory of collaboration, <i>Enthusiast!</i> investigated the practices by which writers circulated their reading and developed new audiences. Through the book's case studies, literary enthusiasm was identified as a crucial means of cultural intervention. Confirming the value of the research, the <i>TLS</i> reviewer (23/01/2009: 23) observed that, 'in its rigour and urgency, [<i>Enthusiast!</i>] sparks a ... counter-circuit of exchange, which should be expanded by anyone who cares about the state of reading.' <b>Herd</b>'s poetry intersects with his critical project in staging encounters between lyrically experimental language and public discourse. His recent collection, <i>All Just</i> (2012) [2.3], brings the attentiveness of experimental poetry to the politics of human movement. As the reviewer in <i>PN Review</i> 208 (2012) observed, 'Only a handful of English-language poets are writing as uncompromisingly, and as importantly, as Herd', while the <i>LA Review of Books</i> described the book as 'one of the few truly necessary works of poetry written on either side of the Atlantic in the past decade – because it seeks a kind of active citizenship from its readership' (28/10/2013).</li> <li>2. As poet and translator, <b>Smith</b> has developed the New York School tradition out of which he works. The twin strands of <b>Smith</b>'s practice are drawn together in <i>London Bridge</i> (2010) [2.4], in which his experimental urban poetic is in dialogue with translations of Hölderlin, Martial, Catullus, and Apollinaire. The purpose of the book is to develop the <i>flan�ur</i> style learned from Frank O'Hara</li> </ol>

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by re-situating it in a British urban environment. Through its mix of canonical and contemporary references, the book links the possibilities of innovative poetry to the resources of the tradition. In so doing it contextualises experimental work for a contemporary audience. Praising *London Bridge* for its ‘simultaneously accessible and avant-garde poetry’, the reviewer in *PN Review 200* (2011) noted that, ‘As Smith’s collections accumulate ... one feels something significant emerging.’

3. **Gaffield** was awarded the Aldeburgh First Collection Prize and shortlisted for the Forward First Collection Prize for *Tokaido Road* (2011). [2.5] The book was conceived as a response to Hiroshige’s woodcut prints and as a development of the modern ekphrastic tradition initiated by the New York School poet John Ashbery. Taking Ashbery’s ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ as a poetic model, **Gaffield** developed an inquiry into the implications of ekphrasis by building on her longstanding research into cognitive linguistics. Starting from a study of Edgar Rubin’s ‘figure-ground’ theory, **Gaffield** explored the different ways paintings and poems figure the relation between subject and context. She has since been commissioned by the Okeanos Ensemble to develop the text as a libretto for an opera to be premiered at the Cheltenham Music Festival.

4. With her second collection, *Littoral* (2013) [2.6], **Debney** continued her exploration of the intellectual possibilities of the prose poem. Taking the prose poetry of Ashbery’s *Three Poems* as a point of departure, **Debney** sought new ways to articulate change and movement in poetry. Having undertaken research into the science of geological and coastal phenomena, she built on this preparatory scholarship by taking up a Canterbury City Council writer’s residency in a beach hut on the North Kent coast. As part of the project’s research she staged an on-site installation, setting the poems-in-progress amid projected definitions of coastal terms and found artefacts, so inviting public comment on the work at draft stage. The resulting collection stages an exploration into the language and shared meaning of regional topography. Work from *Littoral* was ‘highly commended’ by the 2013 Forward Prize panel of judges (chaired by Jeanette Winterson) and the poem ‘Whitstable Spit’ was selected for publication in the *Forward Book of Poetry 2013*.

### 3. References to the research

1. **David Herd**, *Enthusiast! Essays on Modern American Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Pp. 212. ISBN 0719074288. RAE 2008
2. **David Herd**, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). Pp. 245. ISBN 0719055970. RAE 2001
3. **David Herd**, *All Just* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012). Pp. 75. ISBN 1847771637. **REF2 output 3.**
4. **Simon Smith**, *London Bridge* (Cambridge: Salt, 2010). Pp. 80. ISBN 1844714902. **REF2 output 2.**
5. **Nancy Gaffield**, *Tokaido Road* (London: CB Editions, 2011). Pp. 78. ISBN 0956735908. **REF2 output 1.**
6. **Patricia Debney**, *Littoral* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2013). Pp. 80. ISBN 1848612931.

**Key grants:** **Herd**, AHRB Research Leave Award, ‘Essays on Enthusiasm’, April 2005-May 2006, £14,013; **Smith**, Hawthornden Fellowship, 2009 (writer’s residency award).

### 4. Details of the impact

Concerted work on the creation of a contemporary poetry scene in Canterbury began in 2009. Prior to that point, colleagues worked independently with leading national and regional institutions to develop the way modern poetry is practised, used, and understood. Following **Herd’s** appointment as Director of the Centre for Modern Poetry, a decision was taken to use the shared research base to establish Canterbury as an international hub for contemporary poetry. Building on strategic partnerships with international poetry venues – the Kootenay School of Writing (Vancouver) and Double Change (Paris) – the aim was to create a scene that would reflect and develop new currents in international poetry, while building audiences and changing pedagogy at the local level.

The impacts have been two-fold in the users and audiences they have benefitted. First, by creating a highly innovative international poetry festival (*Sounds New Poetry*) where none previously existed, and by collaborating on an award-winning performance series (*Free Range*), University of Kent poets have built and enriched a new regional audience for international poetry, while, by

using the festival to commission new collaborations between poets and musicians, Kent poets have significantly altered the creative practice of leading practitioners. Second, through the Arts-Council funded *Wise Words* project, Kent poets have taken contemporary poetry to out-of-mainstream social groups.

### **Creating an Audience and Changing Creative Practice: *Sounds New Poetry* and *Free Range***

In 2010 University of Kent poets approached the organisers of the long-standing contemporary music festival *Sounds New* to propose a parallel poetry festival, *Sounds New Poetry*. The objective was to create and enrich a new audience for contemporary poetry while significantly enhancing the experience of the existing audience for music. Matt Wright, director of the music festival, confirms the achievement of these objectives: 'It would be no exaggeration to say that *Sounds New Poetry* has created a poetry scene where none existed before, and that that scene is increasingly attracting international as well as national attention.'<sup>[5.1]</sup>

*Sounds New Poetry* first ran in 2011. It stages readings, workshops, lectures and performances in major venues throughout Canterbury and the surrounding region (Canterbury Cathedral; Turner Contemporary Gallery, Margate). Leading poets have included: Marianne Boruch (USA), Steve Collis (Canada), Peter Gizzi (USA); as well as major British poets Tony Lopez, Daljit Nagra, Richard Price, and Michael Schmidt. As Matt Wright confirms, audience numbers have been remarkably large for poetry events.<sup>[5.1]</sup> For instance, 'In 2011 ticket sales for the collaboration "Rote-Thru" between David Herd, Simon Smith, and *Jack Hues and The-Quartet* were 123, while the performance in the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral featuring the Cello Quartet Amsterdam and 6 Sounds New Poets (including Peter Gizzi and Richard Price) had an audience of 272.'<sup>[5.1]</sup>

This new audience for poetry has been further developed by the cross-artistic weekly performance series *Free Range*, on which University of Kent poets collaborate through the poetry collective *Zone*.<sup>[5.2]</sup> As organiser Sam Bailey states, the idea for *Free Range* grew out of the 2011 *Sounds New Poetry* collaboration 'Rote-Thru'. That collaboration showed him that 'more was artistically possible in Canterbury than I had previously imagined'.<sup>[5.3]</sup> As Bailey confirms, since *Free Range* began in October 2011, almost all the poetry events have sold out, while 'The Denise Riley reading on November 15<sup>th</sup> 2012 was the most well-attended event so far.'<sup>[5.3]</sup>

The audiences created by *Sounds New Poetry* and *Free Range* have been significantly enriched by their encounter with new work. After the 2012 *Sounds New Poetry* collaboration 'Feedback' audience member Sampurna Chattarji blogged, 'For forty minutes I am mesmerized as the voices ... enter and leave the music ... I feel lit-up.'<sup>[5.4]</sup> Such representative reaction is confirmed by the citation that accompanied the presentation of the 2013 Canterbury Culture Award for Cultural Pioneer to *Free Range*. As the judges observed: 'This award recognises a truly pioneering, imaginative and courageous project that has collaboration at its heart ... These events are a rich and creative mix of music, film, poetry, technology and even culinary experimentation ... blending performances to create cultural experiences that amaze, inspire and excite.'<sup>[5.5]</sup>

A central aesthetic objective of *Sounds New Poetry* was to advance artistic practice through the commissioning of collaborative works. Such collaborations have significantly altered the practice of leading practitioners. Since working with **Herd** and **Smith**, Jack Hues (leader of international rock band *Wang Chung* as well as *The-Quartet*) has gone on to work with the major British poet Kelvin Corcoran, setting his poems in the sequence 'Thesis on the Ballad'. As Hues states, 'As a composer I treated the compositional space [of 'Rote-Thru'] in a way that I had not attempted before. ... This project has been a very creative springboard for my collaborations.'<sup>[5.6]</sup>

Such advanced creative practice has reached and enriched further audiences. 'Rote-Thru' has since been performed at (among other venues) the 'Xing the Line' series in London (again to a sell-out audience of 100+) and the 'Sounds of Surprise Festival' (Oxford); a studio-recording and discussion of the piece have featured in the music issue of the international journal *Thinking Verse* ([www.thinkingverse.com/rotethru.html](http://www.thinkingverse.com/rotethru.html)). The 2012 collaboration between **Gaffield**, **Debney** and the *Common Objects* ensemble was broadcast on Radio 3's *Hear and Now* (08/09/2012).

### **Reaching out-of-mainstream Groups: *Wise Words***

Building on the success of *Sounds New Poetry*, and on **Debney's** longstanding work in community education, *Wise Words* was a collaborative project led by University of Kent poets and including

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Canterbury City Council, Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU), and the Canterbury Festival. Funded by South East Arts (£9,000), the project used poetry to educate and understand out-of-mainstream groups.

The structure of the project was integral to its achievement. Directed by Debney, four postgraduate creative writing students from Kent and four PGCE students from CCCU worked in pairs with combinations of out-of-mainstream and mainstream social groups: young people recently arrived in the UK using the Riverside Centre, Canterbury; St. Nicholas Special School, Canterbury; the Whitstable performance group 'Desert Island Divas'; the senior dance group 'Moving Memories'. The project's aim was to use poetry to develop communication between the groups.

The project achieved two interconnected objectives. First, it changed the way poetry is used in the training of teachers in the East Kent region, so enabling new teachers to put poetry to further use once they entered the classroom. Second, it showed how poetry can be used to educate and understand out-of-mainstream groups. To ensure the further social reach of the project, work developed in the groups was subsequently published in the anthology *Wise Words*.

The impacts of *Wise Words* were threefold. First, the project altered the training of teachers at a regional level. Virginia Bower, Senior Lecturer in Primary Education at CCCU, states, '*Wise Words* has changed the way I think about teaching poetry and writing, giving students more freedom and opportunities to decide for whom they are writing and the purpose of their writing.' [5.7] Second, by its example, *Wise Words* has stimulated further innovations in community education in the East Kent region. Inspired by the project, the Canterbury community arts group *Workers of Art* set up the *Wise Words Festival 2013*. As Director of *Workers of Art* Beth Cuenco reports, 'The success of the *Wise Words* Project in terms of both process and product, inspired our team to reshape how we engage with ... the community through our outreach.' [5.8]

Third, the project significantly benefitted users of out-of-mainstream groups. This is measured by their commentary on the project in the anthology. Invited to write a collective letter to adults in the community, the young people using the Riverside Centre (who asked to remain anonymous in the anthology) wrote: 'I want to be listened to / I want you to be able to communicate well with me / I want you to understand my feelings / I want you to have confidence in me and give me chance'. [5.9] The significance of *Wise Words* for its primary users lies in the fact that it enabled these shared thoughts to be voiced publicly. The *Wise Words* project as whole consolidates the overarching intention to establish Canterbury as an international poetic centre that promotes the public value of contemporary poetry.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. **Corroborating impact through creation of an audience:** Letter from Matt Wright, Artistic Director of *Sounds New*, 16/06/2013. **RSS Source 1.**
2. **Corroborating impact through creation of innovative poetry scene:** Letter from Tim Atkins, poet, 20/06/2013.
3. **Corroborating impact through creation of an audience:** Letter from Sam Bailey, Director of *Free Range*, 15/07/2013. **RSS Source 2.**
4. **Corroborating impact through enrichment of an audience:** Sampurna Chattarji, blog entry 'Fourteenth of May', [www.ahundredandonedays.wordpress.com](http://www.ahundredandonedays.wordpress.com), 05/06/2012.
5. **Corroborating impact through enrichment of an audience:** Canterbury Culture Awards citation for *Free Range*, 20/06/2013. **RSS Source 3.**
6. **Corroborating impact of commissioned collaborations on creative practice:** Letter from Jack Hues, musician, 21/06/2013.
7. **Corroborating impact on PGCE pedagogy:** Letter from Virginia Bower, Senior Lecturer in Primary Education, Canterbury Christ Church University, 03/07/2013. **RSS Source 4.**
8. **Corroborating impact on community education:** Letter from Beth Cuenco, Artistic Director of *Workers of Art*, 16/06/2013. **RSS Source 5.**
9. **Corroborating impact through enrichment of out-of-mainstream groups:** *Wise Words: The Canterbury Laureate Anthology 2011-12* (Herne Bay: Categorical Books, 2012). ISBN 1904662181