

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> York St John University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 27 English Language and Literature		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Pollination Project, Environmental Writing and Independent Publishing: York Centre for Writing		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2016 - 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Naomi Booth Professor Abi Curtis Dr Rebecca Tamás	Associate Professor Professor of Creative Writing Lecturer	2011 - 2019 2010 - present 2018 - present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2017 - 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>The impacts submitted stem from The York Centre for Writing (YCW) and include permanent changes to the York St John Estate and ongoing University estates policy to further promote wildlife (via the Pollination Project). The generation of new published writing stemming from this project this has supported regional writing and publishing businesses. Impact is then through the connection of a natural eco-system with an artistic one. This is through the creative practice-based research of the staff in the form of novels and poetry collections published with independent northern presses. The production and promotion of this work has a direct impact on the sustainability of these presses. The impact of research and practice into independent publishing has led to curriculum development which in turn has led to the establishment of a new publisher by YCW graduates.</p> <p>The YCW was established to further represent and facilitate the work of the Creative Writing staff. It functions as a hub for diverse work with shared core principles. All projects across YCW, is further evidenced by the support provided to partnerships to develop and disseminate research, including the York Literature Festival, publication, community engagement and media presence.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>This case study relates to a number of practice-based, creative outputs and literary-critical research papers that have been enabled, developed and amplified by the York Centre for Writing.</p> <p>Booth's practice-based work speculates on climate change in a near future and ranging as far afield as Australia and resulted in the publication of her novel <i>Sealed</i> (2017) [3.1] with independent publisher Dead Ink. This in turn led to further research into publishing and particular northern independent presses. Curtis' speculative novel <i>Water &amp; Glass</i> (2017) [3.4] developed from her practice-based research interest in the human-animal relation and the possibility of climate catastrophe. She has spoken about the work on national radio, and been invited to interdisciplinary symposia on animal studies, conservation, literature and design. This interest led to the development of a public, cross-disciplinary, conservation, writing and design project, The Pollination Project, with wide-ranging impacts both in terms of the environment and participant creativity and well-being, and an ongoing online archive. Interdisciplinarity and forging connections between the regional community and national and international communities are key to the YCW.</p>		

Booth's research into on the female body, maternity and climate change takes the form of both critical articles and award-winning fiction works through her novel *Sealed* (2017) [3.1]. Tamás' poetry collection *WITCH* [3.5] and her *White Review* article on the language of the Occult explore the connections between feminism, the occult, witchcraft and ecology, and her work around these themes is creating a cultural discussion about how feminist, political ideas might be expressed and explored through occult thinking. Tamás' has extended this further into a collection of essays, *Strangers* [3.6]. These texts are produced through small publishers (Pinned in the Margins and Makina) and by virtue of this symbiotic relationship help sustain this publishing environment. The research and practice of publishing in the YCW has led to undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum development and in turn the support for a new publisher, Greenteeth Press, developed and run by graduates.

The research that is informed by the remit of the YCW encourages the critique of critical-creative boundaries as a foundation to all projects. The examples submitted focus on gender and social diversity and interact with speculative fiction to debate the future of the environment whilst encouraging its protection, as well as championing the important work in literature and publishing that is happening in the North of England. The centre unifies the approach of the practitioners within the YCW, ensuring impact, theory/practice praxis, pedagogy and community are central to all projects at the point of conception. Location is central to the work undertaken, and the North as a site of cultural production and reception is an intrinsic part of this. This links to the theme of the environment in its broadest sense. Through the practice of interdisciplinary there is an emphasis on diversity and in particular gender diversity.

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

[3.1] Naomi Booth, *Sealed*, 2017, Novel, Dead Ink 978-1911585138 [Listed in REF2]

[3.2] Naomi Booth, *The Lost Art of Sinking*, 2015, Novella, Pinned in the Margins 978-1908058294 [Listed in REF2]

[3.3] Naomi Booth, '*Bathetic Masochism and the shrinking woman*' in *New Formations*, 2014, Article, *New Formations* 83, 47-63 [Listed in REF2]

[3.4] Abi Curtis, *Water and Glass*, 2017, Novel, Cloud Lodge Books 978-0995465756 [Listed in REF2]

[3.5] Rebecca Tamás, *Witch*, 2019, Poetry Collection, Pinned in the Margins 978-1908058621 [Listed in REF2]

[3.6] Rebecca Tamás, *Strangers*, 2020, Essays, Makina 978-1916060890 [Listed in REF2]

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

The Pollination Project, established in 2016, was an environmental sustainability project with an Arts and Humanities focus. This project, originated and led by Professor Abi Curtis, included UG and PGR students, academic staff and external partners. The York St John campus was used as a site of environmental conservation by encouraging pollinating insects, and resulting in an archive of critical and creative work based on and to promote the themes of the project.

This project is a key example of the creative-critical praxis inherent in the YCW, and of its commitment to the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach to research. The project attracted both internal and external funding, including from conservation organisation, Bug Life. The

## Impact case study (REF3)

Pollination Project was based primarily on the York St John Lord Mayor's Walk city centre campus and used this location to create a new wildlife habitat. With this environmental idea at the centre the project also time engaging students, staff and local residents in an interdisciplinary creative/critical project. Wolfgang Buttress was a guest speaker on campus, inspiring students to engage with science, music, architecture and visual art as he had when embarking on his million-pound commission. Artist Amy Shelton has had work exhibited at the Wellcome Trust and uses various natural materials to represent the pollinator cycle, and another collaborator, award-winning poet John Burnside, has written extensively on bees.

The research environment went beyond the campus to Kew and the Wellcome Trust, and the campus grounds became central to the research environment. Original creative work in the form of poetry, prose, art and critical writing were produced and remain part of an ongoing archive. In addition, the living environment remains positively impacted by the activities of the project. The senior grounds staff at York St John University have seen a significant increase in biodiversity over the last couple of years as a result of the project, which, whilst being intellectually grounded and encouraging new creative work, has seen environmental benefits including the inhabitation of species of bee not hitherto seen in the area: "The Pollination Project by Abi Curtis kickstarted a change in working practice for the York St John University gardening team. Prior to the project's initiation the university supported a token, small scale wildlife area not connected to the space allocated for the Pollination Project. Over the past year the Pollination Project has helped attract an increasing amount of wildlife to the area – birds, hedgehogs, bats and all manner of insects. The highlight, being, witnessing the appearance of Tawny Mining bees (*andrena fluva*) in one corner of the site. This sighting led to the decision by University Head Gardener Robert Scott to link both projects to create a (circa) 1/3-acre city Centre breathing space for local flora and fauna. Plants including Birds Foot Trefoil, Knapweed, Teasel, Loosestrife, Oxeye Daisy and Speedwell to name a few have lay dormant or never been noticed. Included in the scheme are habitat log piles for invertebrates and insect hotels in the trees, along with bat boxes close by. The university gardening team are looking forward to witnessing the area evolving into a nature rich environment" (Senior Gardener at York St John University. Here the project has benefits to both research and the wider context of the research 'environment'. The resulting physical wildflower space has drawn a particular species of mining bee to central York, that was not there before, and produced a number of new artistic works, archived here:

<https://yorkstjohnpollinationproject.com/>. [5.1]

In embracing the themes of the YCW other staff members contributed to the publication and engaged in projects with similar environmental themes. Curtis' novel was published by [Cloud Lodge Books](#), whose mission statement is to feature 'writers (and characters) of every race, religion, nationality, gender and sexual orientation'. This was one of the first books produced by Cloud Lodge Books thus informing their development as an independent publisher Curtis' research interest in the human/animal relationship and the speculative possibilities of climate change, the principles that underpin the Pollination Project.

The Pollination Project therefore stands as an exemplar of emergent YCW projects in form and reach:

- There is a printed publication and online archive of creative and critical work with 30 academics, writers and members of the public being represented.
- There were dissemination and engagement events as part of the York Literature Festival in 2017 [5.2]

- There are 20 bee hotels on campus and the wildflower space is now an established part of the campus.
- Professor Curtis spoke on Open Book on Radio 4 about speculative fiction and the environment 2018.

The Pollination Project stands as the example for collaborative interdisciplinary YCW projects such as the Fabric Project, Music, Memory and Memoir, Terra 2 and Horrifying Children which draw on the experience and process of the Pollination Project. The impact is cyclical within the YCW by pollinating other projects.

The work above comes out of the remit of the Centre for Writing to encourage critical-creative boundaries to be challenged and over-turned, to focus on diversity and to speculate on the future of environment/s, as well as championing the important work in literature that is happening specifically in the North of England. Further impact has been achieved through Booth's work on the female body, maternity and climate change and Tamás' work on the environment in *WITCH* and *Strangers*. This impact takes the form of both critical articles and award-winning fiction texts. The fictions have had important impacts on the Northern fiction landscapes. Publisher Dead Ink Books credits Booth's novel *Sealed* (2017) as a 'a pivotal moment for Dead Ink Books as a small press' ensuring its 'long-term survival' and 'growth' and forming a key part of its funding strategy via popular success and promotion of Dead Ink as a site of unique literary production. "The publication of Naomi Booth's *Sealed* has become a pivotal moment for Dead Ink Books as a small press. To date, it is our best-selling fiction title and one that continues to generate demand. Because of this, *Sealed* was fundamental to the strategic planning that went into our subsequent Arts Council England Project Grant application. *Sealed* combined literary quality with genre appeal whilst also being capable of generating distinct talking points with readers. This combination of qualities made the book a clear commercial success for Dead Ink and our analysis of its reception was integral to our grant application. This came at an important time for us as the application in question was focused upon moving Dead Ink from a grant-funded business to a commercially viable one that was capable of maintaining itself through trade sales. This objective is designed to ensure the long-term survival and growth of the press and *Sealed* was central to the strategy behind it and our subsequent commissioning decisions. We have already seen a marked increase in the reception of the titles we commissioned after *Sealed* with this strategy in mind—an increase in publicity, trade sales, and reader reception all stems from Naomi's book.' Nathan Connelly, Dead Ink. [5.3]

Building on Booth's practice, the work of innovative small presses has pollinated the curriculum and has led to the creation of a nationally unique Northern Independent Press Collection as part of the Writing Centre which has meant the recognition and development of a range of Northern presses. Booth and Tamás have published with Penned in the Margins (*The Lost Art of Sinking* and *WITCH*) aiding these publishers and Tamás has most recently worked with Makina Press on her recent essay collection *Strangers*.

The YCW works with Scarborough-based Valley Press on the production of anthologies and in turn has helped the press sustain their business. [5.4] This in turn has informed the development of new postgraduate curricula in Publishing with a specific focus on the support of new and independent presses. This includes a partnership with Lendal Press, York's new independent publisher [2019]. This is most evident in the work of Greenteeth Press, a graduate enterprise which developed in 2018 from the YCW and have subsequently been sustained as a

**Impact case study (REF3)**

business through ongoing collaboration with the YCW on projects. The YCW has achieved success in supporting new writing activity [5.5]. "After starting my own publishing business ... the Creative Writing department have been incredibly supportive. Collaborating ... has improved the financial security of my business and provided experience for a community of writers and publishers." Owner Greenteeth Press. The Northern Fiction Alliance stresses the range of audience members benefitting from the Centre's outward focus on the national place of Northern writing talent in supporting new talent and providing new opportunities for study (MAs and MFAs). To date 15 students have benefitted from the MFA and the ability to focus on the production of a full-length piece of work.

This in turn has continued the University's work with the York Literature Festival, extending the reach of critical work. The takes the work of students to a public audience but also provides an audience and market for new writers and small presses thus aiding sustainability.

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

[5.1] Testimonial: Conservation Officer, Buglife, 2017

[5.2] Testimonial: Representative, York Literature Festival, 2020

[5.3] Testimonial: Publishing Director, Dead Ink Books, 2019

[5.4] Testimonial: Publishing Director, Valley Press, 2019

[5.5] Testimonial: Owner, Greenteeth Press, 2020