

Institution: University of Glasgow (UofG)		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Use of creative practice and research to change perceptions of writing and motherhood		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014–2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Carolyn Jess-Cooke	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer (English Literature)	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2014–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–31 st July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Dr Carolyn Jess-Cooke played a lead role in a move within women's writing on motherhood by producing a creative anthology of poems, essays and interviews by 85 female writers worldwide. Unique in its dual examination of the impact of writing on motherhood and the impact of motherhood on literary art, this anthology, and associated events including touring 13 literary festivals with participatory workshops, contributed significantly to the development of discourse about motherhood and women's writing. Jess-Cooke followed this in 2020 with an online literary festival that attracted 15,000 participants, including many from groups who less commonly participate in literary festivals.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The underpinning research comprises a body of work in the field of creative writing, initially a series of poems, which received a K Blundell Award from the Society of Authors and a Northern Writer's Award [3.6]. This work was built upon by Jess-Cooke's <i>Writing Motherhood</i> touring project during 2013–2015 and funded by the Arts Council of England, which took twenty female writers to thirteen literary festivals throughout the UK. In doing so, Jess-Cooke as PI sought to address the impact of motherhood on women's literary work and careers, to engage audiences in creative writing as a practice for self-reflection in the event of motherhood, and to address issues of censorship and representation prevalent in the publishing of women's writing. This touring formed the basis of research output [3.1], a curated anthology of essays, interviews, and poems, some specifically commissioned, by 85 female writers worldwide.</p> <p><i>Writing Motherhood</i> is prefaced by a substantial critical essay by Jess-Cooke that analyses why female writers with children are still asked how they find time to write. This introduction interrogates notions of women's domestic work as fundamentally unpaid, overlooked and undervalued, and the idea that women's writing is consequently imbued with notions of invisibility and reduced worth. This is particularly so when the writer is also a mother, with the assumption that her attention ought to be on work that is intrinsically domestic. Motherhood is explored as a site of sexism, and as a nexus of socio-political tensions around subjectivity, work, and identity, with many mothers reporting feelings of isolation and self-loss in tandem with a surge in creative expression and contentment.</p> <p>Jess-Cooke's project explores maternal subjectivities in contexts of authorship, lived experience, late capitalism, the publishing industry and cultural representations of motherhood, and examines the ability of the mother to articulate her personal, private, and public aspects of being through her writing. The project also found that literature on the subject of motherhood was frequently presented by publishers in a series of stereotyping, highly trivialising ways. Jess-</p>		

Cooke's subsequent research, well-exemplified by outputs [3.2, 3.4, 3.5], expands this body of work, setting out to further challenge this perception and explore topics, challenges and experiences surrounding motherhood as well as other challenges facing women writers.

3. References to the research

1. Jess-Cooke, C. (2017) *Writing Motherhood: A Creative Anthology on Motherhood and Writing*. Seren <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/134986/> [Available on request from HEI]
2. Jess-Cooke, C. (2017) *Supernova*. Litro <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/161978/>
3. Jess-Cooke, C. (2017) *I Know My Name*. HarperCollins <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/134985/> [Available on request from HEI]
4. Jess-Cooke, C. (2016) *Now* (poem). *Poetry Review* 106(4), p. 33. <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/133446/> [Available on request from HEI]
5. Jess-Cooke, C. (2016) *Picking Oakum* (poem). *Compass Magazine* (4) <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/135001/>
6. Jess-Cooke, C. (2014) *Boom!* Seren: Bridgend, Wales ISBN 9781781721759 <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/113021/>

Quality: the body of work is expected to meet or exceed the 2* threshold.

4. Details of the impact

4.1 Contributing to a changed discourse through the anthology

A 2015 review of the project noted motherhood as '*an experience that has long been dismissed by literary critics and male writers as a niche experience*' [5.1], and in 2018 *Writing Motherhood* was noted amongst those marking a sea-change and a sudden proliferation of literature about motherhood by mothers [5.2]. The American journal *POETRY* described it as '*ground-breaking*'; the *Evening Standard* selected it as '*one of the best new books on motherhood*' [5.3]; Wales Arts Review chose it as their Book of the Year; and Rachel Bower placed it amongst those recent volumes influencing '*an increasing acceptance of birth and motherhood as subjects of poetry*' [5.4].

4.2 Contributing to a changed discourse through empowering participants

Several of the project participants gained confidence in the subject and went on to make their own successful contributions to this newly elevated topic. One project contributor, Hollie McNish, posted a spoken-word poem titled *Embarrassed*, about breastfeeding in public, on YouTube. The poem went viral, receiving 1.3 million views in a week. McNish had performed the poem at the *Writing Motherhood* event with Jess-Cooke at the 2015 StAnza Poetry Festival in demonstration of the project's political agenda. McNish told the audience that her new book, a collection of essays and poems about motherhood, had been turned down numerous times, with publishers believing that motherhood was '*too difficult to market*'. The book won the Ted Hughes Award in 2016. McNish commented that '*[the] project really made me believe that motherhood was a valid literary subject*' [5.5].

In 2018, another contributor (1), commented that the project '*inspired me to write into my experience, into the white-heat of it. Those poems went on to become my pamphlet*' [*The Republic of Motherhood* (Chatto, 2018)]. The title poem of *Republic of Motherhood* won the coveted Forward Prize for Poetry 2018, involving a reading at the Royal Festival Hall, performances on BBC Radio 4 and a variety of high-profile readings [5.6].

Another contributor (2) to the project, and novelist [5.7], stated that *'taking part in the Writing Motherhood project [...] transformed [my] creative work. [The] idea that creative work is an indulgence or guilty pleasure, particularly for mothers, was something I wanted to explore further in my novel DAY OF THE ACCIDENT (Penguin, 2019).'*

Yet another participant, [5.8], also an Assistant Professor at Ohio State University, stated that *'the juxtaposition of stories about maternity in the anthology certainly helped develop my thinking: this was especially in studying the connection between motherhood trauma and obstructions to reasonable debates surrounding abortion. Reading and being involved with Writing Motherhood has inspired and strengthened various of my [creative] projects'*.

These statements illustrate that participation in the project led to increased confidence and inspiration in writing about motherhood. In total, 800 people participated in person and 1.2 million people engaged online e.g. via social media and YouTube. The project represents a significant contribution to the above-noted shift in attitudes affecting the genre.

4.3 Writing workshops inspired by and using the anthology

The project and anthology have achieved further significant impacts through writing workshops based on the book. For example, a series of workshops organised by Helen Calcutt used the book after Calcutt wrote a [review](#) of it. She said of the anthology: *'many of the poems have inspired starting points for new writing, and the existence of the book alone, gets people talking. I sense a kind of ownership among mothers when they see it – like this is something that already, inherently belongs to them by motherly right...'* [5.9]



Figure 1: Mothership participants

A further series of participative creative writing workshops for mothers titled *Mothership* also used the work. Its organiser commented on her use of the anthology, in addition to a highly successful Writers Inspiration Day [5.10]: *'I've used several of the poems from [Writing Motherhood] in the Mothership sessions – it's been a fabulous resource. While the first part of our workshops always focus on general principles of creative writing, in the section half of each session I hone in on motherhood ... your anthology has proved invaluable'*.

4.4 Stay-at-home! online literary festival widening participation during lockdown

Building on the theme of inclusion and the experience of *Writing Motherhood*, and in response to the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, Jess-Cooke initiated a further literary festival, in collaboration with [Paper Nations](#). Partly inspired by the experience with *Writing Motherhood* where physical attendance was often a barrier for young mothers, Jess-Cooke organised this event, [Stay-at-Home!](#), entirely online. The event was held over 16 days between 27 March 2020 and 11 April 2020, featuring 220 authors and 145 events, with 15,000 participants attending. Of 154 formally surveyed, 65.4% identified themselves as audience members, 22.9% as participants and 11.8% as presenter/facilitator.

Comments indicated that many experienced fewer barriers than usual to attendance at literary festivals. For example, asked how the event compared to other writing events, many indicated they found it more enjoyable, more interactive, and that it had a greater sense of community and

was more accessible. One commented: *'I didn't need to take time off work and pay a lot of money to travel. I could easily access from home, so it was much more accessible'*. Indeed the only barrier identified was lack of time, whilst an advantage was afforded to many respondents who mentioned that disabilities and caring responsibilities limited their ability to attend in-person events. Beyond accessibility, participants indicated they found the experience inspiring, with 55.6% stating they would write more often as a result, and 75.3% that they would attend more writing events [5.11].

At the festival, writers indicated they were able to engage audiences they would not ordinarily, for example: *'A great thing for me was access to a much more diverse audience than I would normally get - younger wider range of interests and ethnicities, really positive and refreshing on both sessions'*. This was reflected in participant comments, for example one stating *'as someone who has disabilities and chronic illnesses this was amazing for me. So accessible and allowed me to experience more than I possibly could physically do in years.'* Another commented that *'one of the best things about this is it's accessibility, lit fests are generally just an upper middle class thing'*. [5.11]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Charlotte Runcie, 'Mother's Day: Why We Need More Good Writing About Being a Mother', *The List* (March 2015) [PDF, also available at <https://www.list.co.uk/article/69081-mothers-day-why-we-need-more-great-writing-about-being-a-mother/>], corroborating the important contribution that the *Writing Motherhood* tours made to discourse surrounding motherhood in 2015.
- 5.2 Rachel Bower, 'Writing Birth: On the Poetry Of Motherhood', November 2018 [PDF, also available at <http://wildcourt.co.uk/features/1869/>], corroborating recognition of the role that the *Writing Motherhood* edited volume made to a shift in attitudes about publication of women's writing on the subject of motherhood.
- 5.3 Seren Books [publisher] webpage listing reviews for *Writing Motherhood* [PDF, also available at: <https://www.serenbooks.com/productdisplay/writing-motherhood>], quoting reviews of the publication.
- 5.4 'Best New Books About Motherhood,' *London Evening Standard* (Aug 2018) [PDF, also available at <https://www.standard.co.uk/shopping/esbest/books-dvds/best-new-books-about-motherhood-a3918381.html>], corroborating reviewer recognition of the volume amongst the best on the subject as it gained status.
- 5.5 Testimonial letter, Hollie McNish, Nov 2018. [PDF of email], corroborating the impact of participation in the original project for her as a writer and her career.
- 5.6 Testimonial letter from contributor 1, Nov 2018. [PDF of email], corroborating the impact of participation in the original project for her as a writer and her career.
- 5.7 Testimonial letter from contributor 2, Nov 2018. [PDF of email], corroborating the impact of participation in the original project for her as a writer and her career.
- 5.8 Assistant Professor, English & Sexuality Studies, Ohio State University [PDF letter], corroborating the impact and influence of the anthology on their practice as well as its timeliness and intellectual significance.
- 5.9 Testimonial letter, Helen Calcutt [PDF of email], corroborating the importance of the anthology and her use of it for running writing workshops for mothers, as well observing the effect of this on the mothers in the workshops.
- 5.10 Email from organiser of *Mothership* workshops which used *Writing Motherhood* as a key resource [PDF of email], corroborating the use of the anthology for running effective writing workshops for mothers.

5.11 Results from a survey carried out by Paper Nations at the Stay-at-Home! online literary festival [PDF], corroborating aspects of the background of participants, evaluating the event and indicating its effect on them.