

MATERIALITY, MEMORY, MOTHERHOOD AND MIGRATION



Materiality, Memory, Motherhood and Migration

Thinking through things: Sharing stories
of mothers and motherhood told through
everyday objects and belongings



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Introduction

Dr Carole Hunt and Dr Marie-Clare Balaam
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Materiality, Memory, Motherhood and Migration is an interdisciplinary project situated at the intersection of the arts, health and humanities. It is a collaboration between the University of Lancashire and East Meets West, an international women's group in North West England which supports asylum seekers and refugees. The project uses material culture to explore asylum seeking and refugee women's experiences of maternity and their transition to motherhood in the UK. The overall aim is to explore the potential of innovative and more inclusive ways of working with asylum seeking and refugee women to ensure that their voices are heard and at the centre of conversations about their maternity care and perinatal wellbeing.

As part of two community-based workshops women were asked to bring along objects related to motherhood, that were special to them for whatever reason. Our focus was on objects which Turkel (2007)¹ describes as having had a role in a significant life transition, whereby an object serves as a marker of relationships and emotional

connections. The significant life transition in this instance was becoming a mother! Objects brought along to the workshops became the catalyst for conversations amongst the women from East Meets West and members of the research team. The women explored and shared experiences of maternity, becoming a mother, motherhood and mothering in the UK. As the women talked about their objects and reflected upon their experiences, issues of loss, adaptation, commonality and difference were explored. Alongside, there was warmth, friendship and an underlying connectedness through simply being women and mothers together.

Conversations were recorded and objects photographed. Images of the objects and the women's words have since been exhibited and presented at community and academic events related to migrant and maternal health, and inclusive and creative methods. This booklet brings together a selection of objects and their associated stories of materiality, memory, motherhood and migration.

¹ Turkle, S. (2007) *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*. Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press.

East Meets West

Jane Lippitt and Lana Abu Hijeh
Co-Chairs of East Meets West

East Meets West is a women-only social support group with an international flavour. It began in 2006 in the wake of recent terrorist attacks, with women of Christian and Muslim faiths meeting to share common interests, and it has now grown to include women from a huge range of nationalities, cultures, languages, faiths and no faith. They live in Lancaster and Morecambe for many different reasons – some as wives of students or workers at the university or the hospital, and some are women from the local refuge, asylum seekers or refugees on resettlement programmes.

We meet every week to chat, drink tea and coffee and share a delicious lunch cooked by one of the women.

We get involved in projects that enable the women to have a voice in the community. One such project was the Midwifery Project with the University of Lancashire, which gave new mums a wonderful opportunity to speak about their experiences of giving birth in a country very different from the ones they had grown up in.

The Materiality, Memory, Motherhood and Migration arts and health project involved the same women who had visited the University of Lancashire to talk to the midwifery students.

They were very happy to bring along items that held huge significance for them in their experience of childbirth and parenting and to talk about these. Some women had left their homelands with very few possessions, and because they were not able to keep mementos from previous childbirths, the ones they now have from their babies born in this country are all the more precious.

One of the women who took part in the project said:

“So, the first thing I bought for my little one was this small blanket... I had other things in my country... but we left, we had to leave everything... so I have to start for them from the beginning.”

Lana Co-Chair of East Meets West, described her experience of the project:

“This project created a safe supportive space for us to come together and share our thoughts. It was incredibly empowering, giving me the confidence to speak up, knowing that our stories were truly valued. For many of us, this was the first time we felt that our voices mattered in a public setting, and this is so important for women who have experienced displacement and uncertainty.”

Babygrow and Snuggle

Iran, 2023

I realised when you are, you never
ever alone, when you're talking
to others, it doesn't matter what
language, it's okay, they can feel
you and they can help you, even
you can't believe that.





Zebra Comforter

Iraq, 2023

So, the first thing I bought for my little one was this small blanket... I had other things in my country... but we left, we had to leave everything... so I have to start for them from the beginning.

Hair Nest

UK, 2024

This little nest is made up of baby curls from my three children: a red curl, a very dark curl and a blonde curl. I keep it because it reminds me of holding them close and smelling their baby hair.





Hat and Cloth

Iran, 2023

Yes, it's true we haven't anybody
from our home, but we can have
other people as our new family,
we can make a new family.

Baby Quilt

America, 2023

This baby quilt was made for me by my paternal great grandmother. It connects me to my family and homeland through time, of all those who have loved and nurtured me through my life's journey.





Socks

Sudan, 2024

I don't know anything about
this country – how to buy
clothes and which clothes...
I don't know. I asked some more
Sudanese women here, I said
I haven't birthed before here in
this country, so I don't know.

Blue Shoes

UK, 2023

These were my boy's shoes.
He was a 'late walker' and
they remind me of him learning
to walk and of me learning
to be a mum.





Cloth

UK, 2023

My firstborn... she just became really attached to it, so it became her cloth, and I am absolutely sure... this was one of her first words, cloth, not mummy or daddy but cloth, so in the end she couldn't go to sleep without it.

Little Red Dress

Syria, 2023

She keeps them to give them
to her daughter when she grows
up to give to her daughter,
her granddaughter.



Babygrow

India, 2024

I remember at the time just really liking it because it was like soft and teddy bear like, sheep like, you know... It was a neutral colour, whatever gender it was going to be, with little teddy bear ears, and yeah, we just got it and she wore it and then her sister wore it and years later the younger sisters have worn it you know?

So yeah, this was one of the things that I could associate with all of them.



Matthew

Sudan, 2023

I love to be mum... to take care
of them to put them in school,
I work a lot, hard work to put
them in school... I just keep this
to remember as a mum, as [my
son] loves to play with Matthew.





Babygrow for a Boy

Syria, 2023

She was so happy because
it is the boy after two girls,
so she was buying a lot
of clothes!

Umbilical Cords

Palestine, 2023

I wished my mum to keep something for me and she couldn't. So, I thought, no, I have to keep things for my kids... I kept one small bag for them, like only for special clothes they wear when they were young not all their clothes but unfortunately, it was missing.





Hair Pockets

Palestine, 2023

This is for my boy, and this is for my girl from their first haircut. I keep it because in our culture, we take off all the hair and usually we will weigh the hair and for the weight we give money for the poor people... I want my kids to in the future when they grow up to see these things and I'm sure it will mean a lot for them.

Dinosaur Dungarees

Syria, 2023

Clothes for before
my baby, yes...





Hair and Umbilical Cord

Syria, 2023

Because in Arabic culture we prefer that we cut all the hair off the baby... like it to keep it or if you don't like to keep it you can also give as a donation to some poor people.

Teddy Comforter

Syria, 2023

This is the first thing she
bought for him, and he
cannot sleep without this!





Blanket

UK, 2024

My mum knitted this blanket for me when I was pregnant with my son. We didn't use it all that much when my son was a baby. I probably didn't want it to get damaged, so tended to use another blanket in the pram when we were out and about. However, I have kept this blanket because my mum made it for me, so it is special – it also reminds me how excited she and the rest of the family were when we were expecting.

Hmm

Pakistan, 2024

Well, with my eldest son, I think of a muslin cloth, because that was his comfort and he would, he would put it in his mouth... we called it hmm and the reason we called it hmm is because whenever he got it... he used to go hmm, so we called it hmm.

Materiality, Memory, Motherhood and Migration is a collaboration between East Meets West and the following:

Dr Carole Hunt University of Lancashire

Carole is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Arts and Media. Her research sits at the intersection of the arts, humanities and health. This draws on multiple perspectives from fashion, art history, visual and material culture to interrogate how historical, social and cultural expectations of women have influenced their treatment and care.

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Cath Harris, University of Lancashire

Cath is an Information Specialist working in the Health Technology Assessment Unit. She specialises in developing and executing search strategies for systematic reviews, health technology assessments, evidence syntheses and economic evaluations.

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Kate Eggleston-Wirtz

Kate is a multi-disciplinary artist and illustrator. Storytelling is at the heart of all her work which often combines photographic visual imagery with poetic text.

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Thank you

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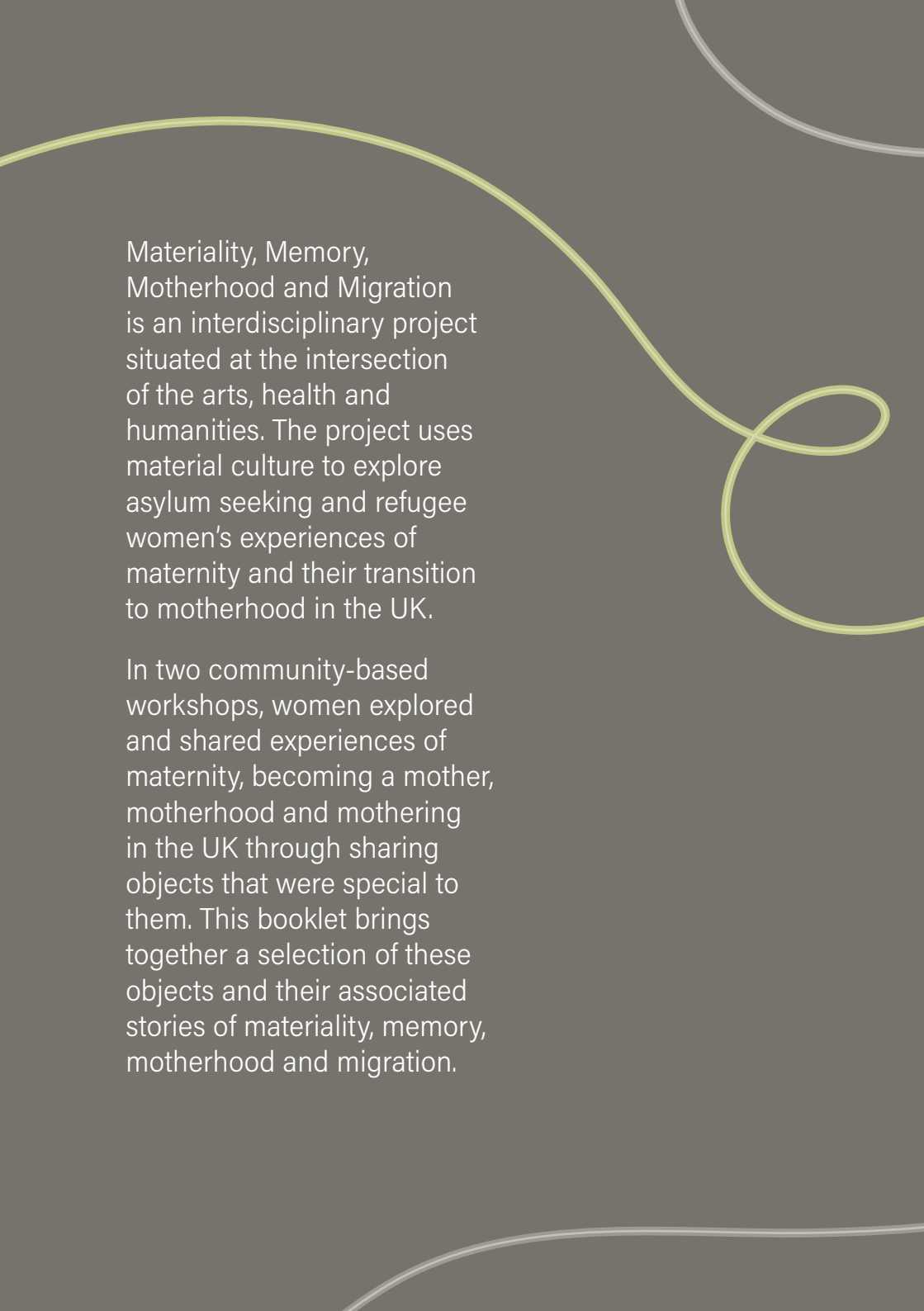
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In two community-based workshops, women explored and shared experiences of maternity, becoming a mother, motherhood and mothering in the UK through sharing objects that were special to them. This booklet brings together a selection of these objects and their associated stories of materiality, memory, motherhood and migration.