

Writing The Climate

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Keywords

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podcasts*

Context

Writing the Climate is a collaborative creative writing project under the umbrella of New Writing North literature development organisation, which was established in 1996 to support writers in the North of England to fulfil their creative ambitions. In 2019 Newcastle University and New Writing North both declared a Climate Emergency and decided to jointly appoint a Climate Writer in Residence.

At the beginning of 2020 poet Linda France took up the Residency, which was initially intended to be 10 months long. Due to the outbreak of the pandemic which meant all resources and interactions had to be shifted online, and partly because of the success and potential of what had already been achieved within 10 months, Linda France, supported by Newcastle University and NWN, successfully applied for funding from the National Lottery and Arts Council England to continue the project for a further two years.

The project continued as Writing the Climate, building on and extending the various initial connections and initiatives. The Residency comes to an end in November 2022, making it a three year long initiative, and project partners are working towards ensuring legacy and longevity for all the work already completed.

<https://newwritingnorth.com/projects/writing-the-climate/>

<https://newwritingnorth.com/journal/article/climate-action-at-new-writing-north/>



Murmuration

Image © Kate Sweeney

Process and outputs

The project was managed by Anna Disley, Executive Director New Writing North, and supported by their marketing and digital teams. Chief Executive Claire Malcolm was also involved, connecting with other partners, for example, the North of Tyne Combined Authority and Faber and Faber.

Deputy Vice Chancellor Professor Julie Sanders was responsible for co-initiating the Residency and coordinated connections within the University.

The project's main aims were to engage with different communities around Climate and Ecological Change, to initiate various cross-arts collaborations and collective projects and to create a new publication of Linda France's own writing.

Forums were created to discuss and explore climate action via writing workshops, book groups, collective poems and podcasts, connecting with people all over the world, generating and deepening a sense of embodied imaginative potential and practical agency among all the participants. Work on the podcast series *In Our Element* involved an international cast of

contributors, including Richard Dawson, Professor of Earth Engineering at Newcastle and on the Adaptation Committee of the UK Government's Committee on Climate Change. It was broadcast on Resonance FM and community radio, and available on all of the main podcast providers. A monthly Writing Hour also proved very popular, attracting large numbers, especially during lockdown. Linda also facilitated two Climate Writing Courses, one for beginners and one for more experienced writers.

One of the project's most impactful outputs was Murmuration, launched in 2020 with an open call for submissions of short verses. From 500 submissions, Linda curated a poem sequence which was then made into a film by Kate Sweeney and launched live online at Durham Book Festival. The launch was attended by over 300 people, and now has over 14,000 YouTube views.

Murmuration

Image © Kate Sweeney



In 2021 Dawn Chorus, made with Christo Wallers, used audio clips from 115 people submitted from all over the world. This launch was introduced by an in-conversation event between Linda and Kate Simpson. The final collective project is **Yours Sincerely: The Climate Letters**. A selection of letters will be made into a physical installation and a webpage.

In her capacity as Climate Writer in Residence, Linda has also contributed to the North East Culture Partnership (presentations and panels, facilitating discussion groups), NE Culture Compact (advisory panel), Newcastle University Anthropocene Research Group (facilitating workshops and attending peer discussions) and Net Zero Narrative Toolkit (advising on policy and documentation), Society of Authors Sustainability Committee (steering positive changes in the publishing industry), Arts Professional (commissioned to write article) and the Gingko and Laurel Prizes for Eco-Poetry (collection shortlisted and poems published in prize anthology, giving readings and workshop). She also coordinated a Poetry Competition and edited a Poetry Anthology for Newcastle's One Planet Alumni Day of Action in 2020.

Murmuration:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFnkvGGZDuw>

Dawn Chorus:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhbnsGca0Ck>

Yours Sincerely: The Climate Letters:

<https://newwritingnorth.com/news/yours-sincerely-call-out-for-climate-letters/>

One Planet Anthology:

https://issuu.com/nualum/docs/nu_one_planet_anthology_10/2

Evaluation and impact

Evaluation has been ongoing throughout the project, informing the development of the work over the three years. Feedback was sought from participants in every strand of the project and this, alongside Linda's own records of her residency, will be drawn upon for the final report for Arts Council England.

Led by Professor Jennifer Richards, Newcastle University Humanities Research Institute will be involved in the final evaluation, with a team of interested students, alongside NWN, once the residency is completed.

The residency has been very successful and surpassed expectations, as a result of the commitment of everyone involved and the urgency of the issues. Based on Linda's longstanding commitment to an alternative approach and replenishing energy at a grass-roots level, the scope of the residency has always been ambitious, wide-ranging and therefore necessarily demanding, but this radical and imaginative reach is reflected in what it has achieved, especially beyond solely academic parameters. Many participants from marginalised communities who were able to attend events online have reflected that the project has helped them, offering emotional support, refining their thinking in relation to the climate crisis and introducing them to new paradigms through creative writing and inquiry.

Writing the Climate has made a difference to individual lives and incrementally in the work people do (e.g. participants have mentioned transferring approaches learned in sessions into leading groups, teaching, youth work, caring), as well as in their own writing and their wider interactions. The residency provided scope for active hope, positive climate action, a space to contribute and connect as citizens, affirming culture as an important sphere for innovative exchange and transformation.

Murmur Bird

Image © Kate Sweeney



The initial outline for the Residency provided a solid foundation and incorporated sufficient space and stability to respond to and develop ideas and opportunities as they arose. For example, after Linda spent a week in Glasgow at the COP26 Citizens' Assemblies, the project celebrated the culmination of a very substantial second year with Earthwords, a live poetry and music event with the Brothers Gillespie at Hexham Abbey, in partnership with Hexham Book Festival, with an audience of 100 people.

Anna Disley at NWN offers this summary:

'Linda France's climate residency has enabled hundreds of people to examine their own personal relationship with the climate through reading, writing and listening. Whilst acknowledging and examining its complexity and interconnectedness, she has invited us to make a personal creative response to an issue which can at times seem overwhelming. She has encouraged us all to stop, breathe and appreciate the things we hold dear through careful, creative, far-reaching invitations to action. She has shown us the role literature can play in the face of this issue, and we at NWN aim to continue to pursue her example.'

Additional Information

From Newcastle University:

<https://www.ncl.ac.uk/creativearts/news/news-items/creativearts-news-climatewriter/>

<https://www.ncl.ac.uk/press/articles/archive/2020/02/climatewriter/>

<https://www.ncl.ac.uk/nuhri/about-us/>

Arts Professional piece: <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/344/feature/finding-words-write-climate>