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CASE STUDY

Practising Public Humanities in a Time of Crisis: Pandemic, Pregnancy, and Panic

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Abstract

This is a reflection on the experience of carrying out an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded public humanities project during the pandemic, focusing on one pathway to impact – a collaboration with Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children's Books – as a case study. I want to explore how we adapted these programmes in the light of global and personal circumstances and embraced digital media in unexpected ways. Looking back on what we accomplished, I now believe that, despite considerable challenges, we ended up with outcomes that were even richer and more rewarding precisely because of the challenges we faced and the unexpected paths that the project took us down. The second voice in this article is that of Charlotte Lancaster. Through her role as a Postdoctoral Impact Fellow at Bath Spa University, she worked to evidence the wider public impact of the "Into the Forest" project retrospectively. Here, she evaluates the impact of the project with Seven Stories and offers a coalescent voice to the argument underlining this article: that we need more realistic and flexible approaches to research planning, funding, and evaluation.

Keywords: environmental history; public humanities

> Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. *That's* where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go.
>
> Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost.*[1]

On 20 March 2020, I was awarded an Arts and Humanities Research Council UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Leadership Fellowship for a project called "Into the Forest: Woods, Trees, and Forests in the Germanic-Speaking Cultures of Northern Europe, c. 46 BCE–c. 1500 CE." Three pathways to impact laid the foundations of this project, drawing on my experience of working in the fields of public history and environmental humanities as a historian and BBC broadcaster. The first was a children's creative writing programme with Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children's Books in Newcastle. The second was a podcast partnership with The National Forest, a UK environmental charity transforming 200 square miles of the

[1] Sonlit 2018, 1.

English Midlands. The third was an artistic project with architectural light projectionists The Projection Studio, exploring the imaginative place of treescapes in Western culture and the historical connections between forests and northern religions. All were designed to be interdisciplinary and collaborative. All involved travel and communal activities in outdoor forest and woodland settings.

On 23 March 2020, the United Kingdom went into lockdown.

By the time the grant started that autumn, the world was in the grip of a pandemic, I had a one-year-old at home, and another baby on the way. I remember the sense of rising panic I felt as I realised how radically we would have to adapt the programme in light of these new global and personal circumstances. Looking back on what we accomplished, I now believe that, despite considerable challenges, we ended up with outcomes that were even richer and more rewarding precisely because of the challenges we faced and the unexpected paths that the project took us down. Our success is, in part, the result of a project that straddled Environmental Humanities and Public Humanities, both fields that often require a degree of risk-taking and an acknowledgement that control can never be absolute.

In her conclusion to *Silent Spring* (1962), Rachel Carson famously warned that "'the control of nature' is a phrase conceived in arrogance."[2] This was indeed one of the hard lessons that COVID-19 would remind us of. It also turned out to be true in the case of research grants.[3]

1. Best laid plans

"Into the Forest" had three main aims. First, I wanted to conduct a multidisciplinary study of trees and forests in the northern Germanic-speaking world, specifically the Nordic world, the Germanic-speaking cultures of the British Isles, and the region of north-central Europe known to the Romans as "Germania." I wanted to provide fresh interpretations of the ways in which historical cultures have thought about and engaged with their physical environments, both from external and internal perspectives. I also wanted to think about how wooded landscapes affect the construction of identity and memory, shedding light on the complex network of historical and cultural connections and influences (religious, political, artistic, literary economic, and legal), and their development over time. My research led me to think about connections between geography and environment – real and imagined – and the way humans think about the world they inhabit, their place within it, and their past.

Second, I wanted to draw on my experience as a BBC broadcaster, especially my environmental documentaries about historical environments and northern cultures, to engage with groups from different sectors of the population (e.g. school children, creative practitioners, community groups, and third-sector organisations). I wanted to find ways to engage people in thinking about the crucial roles played by trees and forests in human history, developing

[2] Carson 2002, 297.

[3] Although there is one narrative "I" in this article, there are in fact two voices and two authors. The second is that of Charlotte Lancaster. Through her role as a Postdoctoral Impact Fellow at Bath Spa University, she worked to evidence the wider public impact of the "Into the Forest" project retrospectively. She is also a new mother trying to juggle the two – often incompatible – worlds of academia and parenthood. She is well placed to evaluate the impact of the project with Seven Stories but also offers a coalescent voice to the argument underlining this article: that we need more realistic and flexible approaches to research planning, funding, and evaluation.

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new resources for creativity and thinking about the more-than-human natural world. Underpinning this was a desire to foster greater awareness of the socio-environmental problems facing trees and forests in the modern era, in the context of the climate and nature crisis.

Third, I wanted to engage in research within the emerging field of Environmental Humanities, a cross-disciplinary area of scholarship exploring the interrelationships between human cultures and the physical environment. By examining the socio-cultural assumptions that underpin our engagement with the physical world, the Environmental Humanities seek to develop new types of ecological narratives about ourselves as biological and cultural beings operating within the world while engaging with the cultural dimensions of pressing socio-environmental concerns. In demonstrating how deep and tangled these roots go, I wanted to expose the tension between the lived experience of the forest in earlier periods and its mediated remnants, actual destruction, and unprecedented importance in an era of climate change and deforestation.

2. Storytelling

Seven Stories is situated in Ouseburn, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in northeast England. They're right on the doorstep of Byker and Walker, two of the most economically deprived areas in the city, sometimes known as "areas of low cultural engagement." We'd planned a 6-week summer programme working with local schoolchildren. The aim was to develop an outdoor creative writing project, working with ecologists, storytellers, and illustrators so that young people could explore how trees, forests, and woodlands shape imaginations and lives. The idea was that the young people who took part would earn their Bronze Arts Award – the national scheme inspiring young people to grow their arts and leadership talents.

Key to this programme was the idea of storytelling. Nathan Hensley has explored the connection between sustainability and storytelling in several insightful discussions. As he explains, "Initiating the process of generating sustainable solutions is at the intersection of sustainability education and public impact. When students learn both to tell their own story (autobiography/autoethnography) and to study the story of their surrounding bioregion, through place-based education, then they are well-positioned to generate sustainable solutions."[4] Elsewhere he explores how stories "enable students to uncouple from unsustainable worldviews and make sense of the ecological crisis. Stories help students acknowledge the human role in the ecological crisis and empower students to initiate the process of generating sustainable solutions."[5]

When I was applying for the grant and pictured my collaboration with Seven Stories taking place, I had already written the story of our creative writing programme in my mind. It would take place under a green canopy of summer trees, in some leafy corners of the city. Fairy lights and bunting were almost certainly involved.

Autumn 2020 arrived, and the grant started. But the world had changed. I started my AHRC fellowship in the middle of another lockdown, having just moved cities (yet again), looking after a one-year-old, pregnant, and utterly discombobulated. The schoolchildren were stuck in the middle of Newcastle, first confined to their homes and then, as measures eased, their

[4] See Hensley 2021, 8–9; see also Hensley 2011, 2020a.
[5] Hensley 2020b, 28.

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school. A different story was starting to unfold. And because of this, we would also have to take a different approach to storytelling.

A different approach to impact would also have to be undertaken, not only in how the impact of the programme was measured and recorded but also in reassessing what was meaningful about the project to the children and school in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Autoethnography and COVID-19

In narrating my experience conducting work in the public humanities at this time, I join a growing dialogue of voices that reflect on how researchers had to adapt their methodologies and expectations at a time of uncertainty and global crisis. Just as the pandemic reshaped our understanding of how fieldwork, research, and collaboration had to be conducted, it reshaped the sort of public and collaborative history my work engages with. Some of these re-shapings were temporary, while others had long-term effects.

This isn't a deep dive into the medieval research that underpins my grant. It's more of an autoethnographic approach, that idea of "backstage access" to research methods that explores the individual's perspectives and subjectivity. This is a term used by anthropologist and filmmaker John L. Jackson Jr. In his discussion of the effect of the internet and digital technology on the researcher's separation – or lack thereof – of work and home life, Jackson Jr. notes that "It makes sense to think seriously about how ethnographers are redisciplined in a world where their backstage (at 'home') continues to shrink into ethnographic view."[6] Jackson Jr.'s analysis was published in 2012. It would take on new significance less than a decade later when meetings that previously would have been conducted in person were digitally transported into the living spaces of every attendee.

Autoethnography has proved a fruitful methodology for those seeking to understand the new world order that arose during COVID-19. This is understandable, not least because, as Nathan Hensley puts it, autoethnography is "a form of inquiry that addresses the uncertainty (and the mess and chaos inherent to lived experience)."[7] As political scientist Marnie Howlett phrased it in a discussion on conducting online ethnographic research during the pandemic:

> Although one of the main benefits of field research is gathering firsthand experience by getting out of the "armchair" and entering the sites under study, the COVID-19 pandemic has made this methodological approach incredibly difficult. In fact, the virus has, in many ways, pushed us back into the armchair – both in a physical and metaphorical sense – and required us to utilize new methods to conduct research from our own homes.[8]

This discussion also touches on a growing conversation about how parenthood – and more specifically motherhood – impacts those building careers within academia. In their work on what it means to be academic mothers before and after career breaks and during an ongoing global pandemic, Bowyer et al. explain how "[i]n order to produce robust, self-reflective

[6] Jackson 2012, 493–4.
[7] Hensley 2021, 6.
[8] Howlett 2022, 398.

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narratives we employed auto-ethnography, a qualitative, transformative research method."[9] This is a methodology also taken up by Ruta Skriptaite, in an article in which she describes what happened to her PhD fieldwork in the states of the former Soviet Union within the dual context of COVID-19 and new parenthood. She describes the "academic lion skin" as something that is ill-fitting or requiring constant alterations for many female researchers with parental responsibilities. She says:

> Carrying out my fieldwork abroad would have meant that I needed to travel with my whole family since both of my daughters are very young... That would have also meant that my partner needs to take time off work to travel with me, so he could look after the children, for instance while I interview people.[10]

And yet, as she goes on to explain: "The international turbulence triggered by the spread of COVID-19 revealed what we see as 'private' and 'public' or 'home' and 'the field' as less than rigid and stable spaces."[11] When these two worlds collided, for instance, if a toddler interrupted an online interview by crawling onto her lap,

> These moments of "exposure" and the inability to always control my private space and fully convert it into a professional one, at least immediately after the interview would make me feel like an imposter – a woman not fully in control of the domain traditionally assigned to her, who is miserably failing at posing as a professional – in a domain which by tradition is normally gifted to men. Such moments when private and public spaces merge would have not been experienced if my interviews had taken place offline.[12]

4. Into the forest at home

We began the project during the third lockdown, in January 2021. We were working with students from Walker Riverside School in Newcastle, with the support of the teachers at the school, who pushed it through despite the enormous challenges they were facing. We were working with 20 students aged 12–14 years. Rather than running the project as part of the English curriculum as previously intended, it was run as a project that students had chosen to take part in. This meant the numbers were much smaller, but also the children were much more likely to be engaged. The sessions were 90 minutes long and held weekly on Thursday afternoons over 10 weeks. Even getting to this point felt faintly miraculous.

In week 1, everyone was at home and the sessions took place over Google Meet. Data protection meant that students had to keep their cameras off and use the chat function rather than the microphone. I was meant to be participating in sessions online, but just when the first session was about to take place, my baby arrived. So instead, they replaced me with clips from the "Into the Forest" radio documentaries I had made for the BBC a couple of years earlier. This series of documentaries was actually what formed the basis of my AHRC application in the first place. Much of my broadcasting work informs my academic research and vice versa: the two are often symbiotic entities and much of the time one naturally leads

[9] Bowyer et al. 2022, 314.
[10] Skriptaite 2023, 137.
[11] Skriptaite 2023, 138.
[12] Skriptaite 2023, 139.

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to the other. But now, this digital output was fulfilling a different function, enabling my past self to be present in an entirely different time and context, speaking to an audience not typical of the BBC Radio 3 listener demographic.

Week 2, still over Google Meet, the Exhibition Curator from Seven Stories told the children all about the tree- and forest-related material in their archive. At this point in the programme, the children started to respond to the material in creative ways that spoke to the more-than-human natural world as it intersected with their "new normal." One student, Lily, recalled being read Martin Waddell's *Can't You Sleep Little Bear* when she was much younger. Seeing it again in the Seven Stories presentation, she was reminded how much she loved it and was moved to write a song on her ukulele, which she filmed interspersed with illustrations from the picture book.

In Lily's beautiful interpretation of the story, we see Mother Bear and Little Bear coming out of their cave to "stand under the moonlight/We'll be okay if we're with the fireflies/Let's go and stand right by the forest and listen as it sleeps/Moonlight will chase away the monsters." I defy anyone to listen to Lily's song without feeling a lump in the back of their throat, especially when we know the monstrousness of the COVID-19 pandemic on these children's lives. At a time when children of Lily's age faced huge disruptions to their education and social lives, not to mention the pervasive threat of severe illness or the death of a loved one, it feels simultaneously natural and heartbreaking that Lily would find reassurance and comfort in a fondly remembered picture book.

From an impact perspective, Lily's song also shows a sophisticated engagement with the more-than-human world as a source of solace and consolation, tapping into discussions on the importance of nature for well-being that were made ever so tangible during the pandemic.

Week 3 brought a new and unexpected development. Given lockdown constraints and the fact that we had to rely on my radio documentaries to fill the absence of me, Seven Stories had asked Chris Watson to come on board. He's one of the leading wildlife sound recordists in the world – if you've ever watched a David Attenborough documentary, you've heard his work. So this week, the children explored sound clips from Chris's website in preparation for meeting him the following week.

Week 4, lockdown was lifted enough that the children were back at school, but the sessions had to continue remotely because after-school activities weren't allowed. At this point, the number of children attending started to drop off, everyone was getting very sick of the lockdown, and Internet and computer access was often hard for the children involved in the programme. The Seven Stories staff leading the programme expressed nervousness because this week was when Chris was speaking, and they were worried about attendance. However, because it was online, the children who didn't make it to the live talk were able to watch it at a later date, allowing for the emotional space and slower pace they needed while dealing with a hugely stressful period in their young lives.

Chris spoke about the wonderful wildlife sounds you could hear in suburban Newcastle due to the reduced noise pollution in lockdown. At the time of recording, the dawn chorus was just coming into its full cacophonous glory and Chris was eager for the children to experience it for themselves. "You do not have to go to the other side of the planet to hear the most exotic, wonderful and beautiful wildlife sounds and songs," he enthused. "In fact, they are just starting to happen right now and here in suburban Newcastle." Chris's session

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exposed what's available on your doorstep and inspired the children to record natural sounds from their own homes. A few even wrote songs or "beats" to accompany the recordings in their own time, "without any prompting!" their teacher noted.

Week 5 was "sounds of the local environment," but again, due to lockdown, they were unable to get out into the park as planned. They were working with another local sound recordist, Michael McHugh, who put together a session about creating sound maps. The students were initially quite reluctant to try this new type of environmental storytelling. However, commented after the activity that they had enjoyed stopping and listening in a way that they didn't normally do. "It's a good test for yourselves to experience your environment in a new way," Micheal told the children. "There is no right and wrong with these sound maps. Look at mine, it's a mess! But that's okay because things are messy." With Michael and Chris's involvement, we started to see a different sort of environmental storytelling emerge: an audio-spatial mapping of the children's local urban environments.

The next 3 weeks were from two young creative writers. They put together three sessions – exploring how to write a story, a poem, and then helping the students decide what they were going to do for their final piece. The students' writings offer a real mix of themes and styles relating to the materials and sources from the programme. Forests appear in these stories and poems as otherworldly, mysterious, and sentient, where "trees and plants all gather around, speaking to each other and making the least amount of sound." They are filled with fantastical fairytale wolves, fairies, and "long, lumbering giants rooted in place." They offer escape and adventure: "She pulled on her boots, unlocked the door, and stepped out into the wild." Elsewhere, they are places where people can come together for magical birthday parties and celebrations. But don't dwell for too long lest the tangle of "thick roots [...] turn the path into a labyrinth."

You can see how much the students engaged with and were inspired by the literary forests they were introduced to from the Seven Stories archive. It is lovely to see the extent to which the programme prompted them to think about the more-than-human natural world in creative and fun ways. Yet their writings also suggest the extent to which the programme gave the students an outlet to express and process their responses to their current moment of pandemic and climate emergency. Carmen's powerful poem "The Want" describes the detrimental effects of capitalist consumerism, or "the needing of want," on the planet's future and the poet's desire to uncouple from these unsustainable, future-depleting behaviours. "I need to get out/Out of the dominance that possesses my life," the poem insists, "The greed can make me succeed, but the need to succeed may never come to me."

Anxieties about mortality are never far from the surface and it is interesting, while also terribly unnerving, that so many of the creative writing pieces express fears around not being able to breathe. One writes about trying to take a breath but finding their lungs full. Another imagines a forest of darkness, where its "victims" are "strangled by the vines that took their last breath." A few dwell on parental loss or echo the mass losses being felt globally: "It was like there was no life, not a single soul," writes one. As sobering as some of these images are, it is important to note that the programme provided a space for students to vocalise concerns and uncertainties about the pandemic indirectly.

The role of children as a public is often neglected in discourses about the public humanities. The exclusion of children's voices in these discussions perhaps echoes their absence as a public more broadly – we are only just beginning to realise the extent to which children have been excluded from discussions on the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, for

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example.[13] Yet the value of public humanities programmes, such as this one, is precisely in their ability to provide opportunities for children to engage with and interpret the world around them in ways that prioritise and promote their voices. This is a significant part of the project's impact outcomes; however, it would have been impossible to account for in the early stages of the funding application.

After that, week 9 was special, as the Seven Stories team finally went into the school. They said how wonderful it was to see the students and hear their voices for the first time. It's something we'd have all just taken for granted before. The sound recordist Michael came with hand-held recorders, and everyone went outside to try using them. It had been raining, but the sun came out, and even a few birds. The students kept the recorders for a couple of weeks to see what they could come up with, and they also recorded their creative writing pieces.

5. Limitations and adaptations

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns exacerbated social and structural inequalities across the world.[14] Young people were particularly affected.[15] These equalities naturally extended to access to green spaces and the more-than-human natural world, especially in urban areas of economic and social deprivation.[16] We couldn't have foreseen this, but our project fed directly into many of these inequalities. It also exposed what's available on your doorstep if you're given the tools to explore it and appreciate it. Both sound recordists Chris Watson and Michael McHugh are local to the area. They took so much time to share their experiences and expertise with the children, and the children gave just as much back. It highlights once again the importance of engaging with society's youngest generations as we look at the climate and nature crisis. I was struck by how this was evidenced in the chats the children had during the online presentations: how they're talking about their local surroundings, how they're talking about illustrations, how they're talking about their own creative projects, and then probably my favourite comment from George: "my big brother said never trust nature."

Initially, this was a public programme that was moved into a digital/online medium to deal with an external crisis that inhibited our ability to come together in person: pandemic lockdowns and childbirth. This naturally came with limitations. Online, it was harder to build up personal relationships and trust. There was the question of whether the children would have the online access at home required to participate in the programme. Nevertheless, the digital adaptations we made to our programme also helped to increase inclusivity and accessibility. In an email describing the impact of the project, a teacher wrote about the conjoined challenges of navigating the pandemic personally and professionally while keeping connected to the students through the transition from home to school. Even with all those difficulties in mind, she writes, "this diverse group of people are really special, and they were so connected to the project. Ah, it's been a joy!"

In fact, had the programme been conducted in person and without the limitations imposed by lockdowns, I would have been even less able to take part in it. By that time, I was living in

[13] Recent findings published in the *BMJ* revealed that in 200,000 research studies on mental health impacts carried out at the height of the pandemic, only 35 of those concerned children, as noted in Ford et al. 2024.

[14] See Zhou and Kan 2021.

[15] See Anders et al. 2021.

[16] McDonagh 2022.

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London, while the children were based at the other end of the country in Newcastle, and the fact that I had a newborn and a one-year-old would have made it impossible for me to attend sessions. This way, even when I wasn't able to be present for the online sessions themselves, I was able to catch up on recordings when my children were asleep and access the digital evidence that came from the online sessions. Inclusivity takes many forms, and in this case, the digital format allowed me to combine my roles as a public historian, environmental historian, and primary caregiver in my children's earliest months.

6. Plans and realities

Pathways to impact set out in a grant application are so neat and straightforward. This orderliness extends into how we formally measure and evaluate the impact of academic research via agendas such as the Research Excellence Framework. Within these narratives, the expectation is that the pathway to impact is linear without the possibility of unexpected tangents or total derailment. In the same vein, outcomes, when they are recorded, are success stories, devoid of challenges and authenticity. Yet, as Julie Bayley notes in her blog post on "Shiny vs. Authentic Impact," "impact is a far more complex, engaged and risk-filled process than these accounts bear witness to." It is, at its heart, "making a difference through research."[17]

Sometimes this difference is surprising. It can be as subtle, but no less significant as a child inspired to write her own song, or finding the joy of recording the sounds of his garden. This whole experience was a vital lesson for me about embracing the imperfections and messiness that inevitably crop up when a grant application becomes a funded project, rejecting the idea of there being a set of blueprints that must be followed to reach a successful outcome. Instead, by allowing space for greater flexibility and adaptability, we allow room for richer, more unexpected outcomes that have the potential to be more imaginative, diverse and inclusive in their turn.

And not in spite of but because of the combination of factors that were so challenging at the time, this grant has become a space for flexible, adaptable thinking, a way to share ideas and explore synergies. Many fine and wonderful things can be lost in the creation of even finer and more wonderful things. At times, this was my experience of combining research and parenthood while set against the backdrop of a global pandemic.

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[17] Bayley 2021.

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