

## Taking Liberties Abstract

This paper will focus on a Leverhulme Foundation-funded research project, Taking Liberties, which took place at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, from January to May 2018. The paper will trace some antecedents for this multilingual Creative Writing project, drawing out methodological practices that informed its design and implementation. It will trace the engagement with students at the University of the Western Cape in the context of historical and contemporary political conditions. Outputs from the project will be featured and discussed in terms of text and performance. Links will be provided to web-based outputs to create an interactive dimension. My discussion of the project will reflect upon the nature of practice-based research in Creative Writing and the wider implications for the discipline and its inter-disciplinary capacity.

## Keywords

Liberty, Creative Writing, African Writing, Apartheid, Poetry, Performance, Multilingual Writing, Collaborative Research, Research-as-Practice.

## Taking Liberties

*Ideals of freedom in contemporary South Africa: a practice-based approach to research with multilingual writing communities.*

This paper will focus on a Leverhulme Foundation-funded research project, Taking Liberties, which took place at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa, from January to May 2018. That project had its roots in an earlier multilingual project, Homecoming, that I carried out at UWC in April 2014 and whose methodology reaches even further back to my multilingual work on the Preston Peace Garden with the Harris Museum in 1991. The Crossing Borders and Radiophonics<sup>i</sup> projects in sub-Saharan Africa also form methodological antecedents, whilst the AHRC-funded Moving Manchester<sup>ii</sup> project consolidated those in a UK setting. An ethnographic project with Kurdish women, Many Women, Many Words<sup>iii</sup>, carried out in Kurdistan with the University of Soran from 2013-2016, forms another point of reference through its establishment of research archives, a translation process and

outcomes that are practice-based rather than formally analytical. My intention is to show how these tributary projects shaped the methodology of *Taking Liberties* and led to web and print-based research outputs through a process that was open-ended and exploratory and which resisted an analytical outcome in favour of a polyphonic heterogeneity.

I also want to focus on the realities of running practice-based research projects, on their inherent and perhaps inevitable methodological impurity, where unforeseen events disrupt the most careful planning process, where human relations form part of the tissue of that research and where, by its very nature, that research may seem more of a partially-realized and open-ended process than black-boxed model in which inputs and outputs have been measured in a way that can then be subject to a totalizing analysis.

In April 2015 the first international Writing for Liberty<sup>iv</sup> conference was held at Lancaster University under the auspices of the Centre for Transcultural Writing and Research (CTWR).<sup>v</sup> Our intention was to explore writing – creative, critical and hybrid forms – that had been used to defend or extend the notion of human liberty through its resistance to dominant cultures or regimes that might threaten any perceived aspect of human freedom. Our intention was that creative writers, critics and theorists could participate in the same discussion panels. Our broader aim was that the conference would be held biennially and would move between Lancaster and other global locations. Accordingly, in April 2017, the second Writing for Liberty<sup>vi</sup> conference was held at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town, hosted by the University of the Western Cape through the auspices of Meg Vandermerwe and UWC Creates<sup>vii</sup>, an offshoot of the Creative Writing programme at UWC committed to outreach exploration and the publication of new writing from Cape Town communities in Xhosa, English and Afrikaans. The most recent Writing for Liberty conference was held in April 2019 at the Universidad Nacional De San Martín in Buenos Aires<sup>viii</sup>.

Meg Vandermerwe had been my PhD student at Lancaster University and was keen to maintain the connection to CTWR at Lancaster and extend the work she had been developing at UWC with writers Sindiwe Magona and Antjie Krog. Antjie was the keynote speaker for the 2017 Cape Town conference, which attracted delegates from across South Africa, as well as Uganda, South America and the UK. CTWR played a supporting role in programming the conference. In my case, this was also an extension of my role as an Extraordinary Professor at UWC, a visiting professorship that had been conferred in 2014

when I made an extended visit to UWC to write and teach there for six weeks. During that period of residence in 2014, a general election was under way and I was struck by a statistic that appeared during the weeks when the African National Congress (ANC) fought to win another term of office against an emergent opposition: less than a third of all “born free” South Africans (those born since the ending of Apartheid in 1994) had even registered to vote<sup>ix</sup>.

I made an application to the Leverhulme Foundation for an International Academic Fellowship in 2016. This had twin aims: to work and teach in the Creative Writing Department at UWC for three months and to explore notions of liberty in a multilingual project that would deploy practice-based creative writing methodologies to explore concepts and expressions of liberty in contemporary South Africa. It was felicitous that I heard that this bid had been successful when attending the 2017 Writing for Liberty conference in Cape Town and I attended to the ongoing debates there with renewed sense of engagement. Those debates – about who speaks for whom in South Africa and how – became daunting in their ferocity as successive layers of history were peeled from a core of grievance, disenfranchisement and appropriation.

Before entering academia (in 2001), I had worked as a freelance writer in education. In the late 80s I had been involved in the Pavement Project at Carlton Bolling Secondary School in Bradford. The poems of pupils at the school were inscribed into paving stones in the city centre, using both English and Urdu scripts. This had come about through the simple expedient of asking children who could write in their mother-tongue to do so. The results were striking both in terms of content and calligraphy. When commissioned to create the text for a Peace Garden by the Harris Museum in Preston in 1991, I worked with a group of English-speaking local writers, but also a group of Asian women whose English-language skills were limited. Aided by a local GP, Susheila Berma, who acted as an intermediary, I guided that group, working in Urdu, Hindi and English to create a hybrid poem that never existed in any single language, though it was subsequently translated into Gujarati. The group had a terrific ethos of mutual support and moments in the construction of the poem were often accompanied by spontaneous applause. It was a moving and hugely engaging experience but most importantly of all, it taught me that I didn't have to control the writing workshop environment and that I could work in languages shared by participant writers but not by me. I didn't have to be an expert when my project participants were the experts. The

poem became a public artwork and is still visible in the Peace Garden on Fishergate in Preston town centre.

The germ of that concept stayed with me and was re-deployed in 2005 when I worked with a group of pan-African writers to create the collaborative poem *Sing Like A River*<sup>x</sup> at the British Council Beyond Borders Festival that I helped to create and programme in Kampala in 2005<sup>xi</sup>. The poem was both a multilingual work and a metaphorical celebration of multilingualism itself:

I learned to sing like a river  
babble like water  
then foreign tongues  
broke over my head.

These tales, these streams flowing  
into unknown rivers  
meet at the sea of familiarity  
telling the strains of ancestry.<sup>xii</sup>

Then in 2014, during my first stay at UWC in Cape Town, I worked multilingually with a group of English, Xhosa and Afrikaans speaking students to create individual poems and a performance poem, *Homecoming*, that explored themes of longing and belonging in which language itself formed a sense of location. Again, it was the expertise and cooperation of the group that helped that work to emerge, as phrases in all languages were deployed, examined, discussed and integrated into the emergent work.

The notion of the collaborative poem seemed to offer an alternative to the Western concept of individual composition, contradicting notions of the lone writer whose inspirational genius had borne canonical fruit. In Africa, where traditions of orality are still strong the collaborative process of composition seemed to offer a more democratic – even traditional – method of evolving a text to which individuals had contributed, in the same way that the work of a *griot* had evolved over centuries. The issue of ownership becomes

blurred into the creative process and the sense of working together with language, dialect and idiolect offers a new kind of synthesis.

During this period of project development through my own action-research, some important developments were taking place in the academic landscape of Higher Education in the UK. Undergraduate courses were being developed at many universities, obversely so in institutions like Lancaster, where the first Creative Writing courses had been MA courses, meaning postgraduate provision preceded undergraduate developments. A growing number of MA graduates had also led to the desire for progression, hence the development of new practice-based PhD programmes in Creative Writing. At Lancaster University Creative Writing PhD numbers grew from three to 30 in a ten-year period. At the same time, the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) was working with the Quality Assurance Association to develop benchmarks for Creative Writing that saw it recognized as an independent academic subject<sup>xiii</sup>. This process was preceded by the development of NAWE's own Research Benchmarks<sup>xiv</sup>, meant to guide the development and ethos of postgraduate study. Whilst formal methods of research and analytical reflection were built into those principles, so was a recognition that creative methods could also be used as a form of affective reflection. At Lancaster a number of my own doctoral students (Ray Robinson, Rhiannon Hoosan, Naomi Kruger) had integrated elements of creative writing into their reflective theses (a prose vignette and a fictional interview, prose poems, and a stage script, respectively) to show that focused creative perspectives could illuminate the wider creative strategies of their doctoral submissions.

In a number of projects in the UK or in sub-Saharan Africa (Moving Manchester, Crossing Borders, Radiophonics) I worked to put writers – their writing, cultural backgrounds and creative processes – at the centre of interest, building online galleries that profiled them. Moving Manchester, led to an academic study (Postcolonial Manchester<sup>xv</sup>) whilst my own contribution created an alternative method: building unmediated platforms in the form of a Writers Gallery<sup>xvi</sup> for Manchester's migrant writers where they could post their creative work and discuss its origins and significance in relation to the project's wider agendas. Since these writers had been considered regional and liminal in the national literary scene, I was keen to create a method that was contrapuntal but complementary to “literary anthropology”, that could maximize the writers' own agency, creating a rich and even contradictory polyphony.

Behind some of these strategies was a somewhat troubled relationship with the way Creative Writing related to critical and theoretical studies of literature that were far more firmly established in the academy. There was a sense that Creative Writing was the new kid on the block (just as English studies had seemed at the turn of the 20th century) and that its practices lacked rigour and legitimacy. There is some truth in the recognition that Creative Writing had to move from charismatic teaching models to more thoroughly grounded pedagogic practice. But the argument that new creative writing, which almost by definition creates or reconfigures forms of knowledge and understanding, had to be subordinate to formal exegesis seemed patently inauthentic. Yet this principle was reinforced whenever the Research Excellence Framework<sup>xvii</sup> audited our outputs and creative writers were asked to supply a critical accompaniment explaining their work as research.

In 2013, I was asked to help design and implement a new research project in Kurdistan, where one of my ex-PhD students, Muli Amaye, was teaching at the University of Soran. Established as a semi-autonomous province of Iran after the 1992 Gulf war, Kurdistan represented a homeland for Kurds in the region as well as a symbolic cultural locus for the world's biggest displaced ethnic group. Saddam Hussein had infamously carried out a genocide – *Al Anfal*<sup>xviii</sup> – against the Kurdish people in the 1980s and 1990s destroying over 4,000 villages, imprisoning or killing the political opposition and forcing the migration of many others into Syria, Turkey and Iran. Whilst the Kurdish media celebrated the contribution of Kurdish women Peshmerga fighters, the experience of women who had fled Kurdistan to protect their children was not highlighted and yet seemed to represent a remarkable act of resistance and resilience. Muli had met a number of these older women and wanted to build a research archive of their stories so that they could be understood by a younger generation of the Kurdish population.

I made visits to Kurdistan in 2013 and 2014, Flying from Manchester to Erbil and being driven through miles of disused agricultural land and mountains still scarred by deforestation to reach the city of Soran. There, we trained a group of young English-speaking researchers in interview methods and in an ethical research process that had been approved by Lancaster University. Fourteen women were identified through a network of connections spreading out from Soran to Rawanduz, Erbil and other towns. They were interviewed in Kurdish, their words transcribed and then translated through a complex and multi-layered process to ensure accuracy. In addition, those who agreed to be

photographed were featured with an object that had been precious to them for some reason during their displacement. A shared website was built to house the images and the narratives in Kurdish and English so that our work took the form of an ethnographic resource<sup>xix</sup>. In the later stages of the project, Islamic State forces threatened Erbil and carried out a new genocide against the Yazidi people. We went back to the women, anxious that some of their accounts might endanger them if Kurdistan was overrun. None of the women wanted to withdraw their stories or images from the website.

By 2016 we had achieved our primary objective of gathering and featuring multilingual versions of the stories on a Kurdish women's stories website, *Many Women, Many Words*<sup>xx</sup>, but we were also aware that an archive of transcripts fell short of our original vision for the project in terms of its potential reach. We were neither sociologists nor anthropologists, so the answer seemed to lie in our own expertise as creative writers. By this time the security situation in Iraq had deteriorated, with Islamic State forces converging on Erbil and massacring Yazidi populations. Accordingly, Muli and I rendezvoused in a writing centre owned by Manchester's Commonword organization near Bergerac in rural France. We brought transcripts of all fourteen interviews and read them intensively. It was clear that there were common thematic threads in all: childhood, working the land, marriage, education, the war, exile, future and return. We marked lines in each interview with marker pens and then cut them out with scalpels, assembling the first rough draft of a performance poem almost at random, then progressively refining the poem whilst trying never to change the women's original wording. A draft of the poem, intended for several voices was then typed up and submitted to our researchers in Kurdistan who checked it for narrative sequentiality, cultural content and historical coherence, guiding us through several iterations. The poem was installed on the project website, translated back into Kurdish, and later performed back to those older women by a group of younger project participants in Soran.

It was at the Writing for Liberty conference in Cape Town in 2017, that the poem was first performed. The performers comprised five black women from South Africa, the US and the UK, directed by theatre specialist, Delia Meyer. The performance took place at the end of the first day of papers and panel presentations. The significance of a work dealing with exile, expatriation and oppression was not lost on a South Africans and by the end of that performance the performers and audience members were visibly affected. Just as a

debate began about the ethics of appropriation, a Kurdish woman from the local expatriate community stood up and through her tears announced, “But this is my story!” It seemed a resounding vindication of our research method, showing that its results could be highly affective as well as historically accurate in its exploration of events at a particular time and place. Performance had become the vector for complex personal and historical circumstances in which poetry was simultaneously a narrative and reflective medium, bearing witness across cultures through its recognizably human dimensions of suffering, anger, love and redemption.

I would argue, too, that just as silence contributes to the structure of music, there were silences at the heart of the Kurdish women's narratives that became increasingly significant. Although one woman gave an account of an honour killing, there were no direct accounts of sexual aggression or abuse. Given the sexual exploitation of Yazidi women in the region in 2016, the long historical association between military and sexual conquest and the vulnerability of the women at the time of their migrations this became an increasingly significant silence for me. One might even say that the women's stories were narratives built around that silence, an intractable sense of grief that was impossible for them to share. So, their way of telling was also perhaps a way of not telling, an act of withholding that was nonetheless deeply communicative.

The research projects listed earlier have led to outputs contributed by their participants: polyphonic accounts of their experience without mediation, explanation or interpretation. Most of them were followed by a more formal academic papers and most, like this one, formed a reflective account of the methodological process. In Kurdistan I kept notebook and took hundreds of photographs, partly to add content and context to the website we were building, but also as a personal resource relating to my own experience. I left the academic reflection to Muli Amaye, who was much more embedded in the culture and experience of Kurdistan than I was<sup>xxi</sup>. Instead of formal reflection, I created a research log tracking the project and my journey into and out of the region that took the form of twenty loose-form sonnets. These allowed me to create a narrative of my experience of the project, albeit one pitted with methodological lacunae, and one that allowed the play of a subjective irony and scepticism in relation to my own activities in Kurdistan. I was intensely aware that my presence at some interviews may have affected the narratives (those silences) that the women related. The poems, through their essentially reflective nature



allowed a kind of self-interrogation, an emotional sense of scale, and a reciprocal narrative gift. The poems were published in their entirety in *The Long Poem Magazine* with a short introduction in 2018<sup>xxii</sup>.

I left the Writing for Liberty conference in 2017 knowing that I was to return in a few months' time to embark on a project, that had begun to seem increasingly presumptuous. A number of fierce debates, including a publicly contested, even hostile, response to Antjie Krog's reconciliatory keynote address<sup>xxiii</sup>, had begun to reveal the vulnerability of my position. After almost eighteen years of working across sub-Saharan Africa in a spirit of collaboration and cooperation, I was beginning to feel a new sense of my own "white privilege" in a political and cultural climate of brutal historical complexity which reached from the suppression of the indigenous Khoi and San peoples to the Apartheid era and subsequent outbreaks of xenophobic violence against migrants from Zimbabwe and other African countries.

When I arrived back in Cape Town in January 2018 it was to an almost frenzied sense of political and social turmoil: president Jacob Zuma was deposed a few days after my arrival (with 75 corruption charges pending); Winnie Mandela died and was immediately rehabilitated (even sanctified) despite her controversial and contested political record; there were outbreaks of violent civil unrest in many regions following the non-delivery of health and social housing services; a national transport strike became entrenched; business entrepreneurs, the Gupta brothers, were being pursued on corruption charges; Patricia de Lille, mayor of Cape Town, was suspended because of corruption allegations. Every night SABC news brought forward new allegations and instances of political and financial corruption. Levels of sexual violence were reportedly at a historical high, and there were many instances of gun crime – from turf wars between taxi drivers to the kidnapping and summary execution of police officers in the Eastern Cape. In addition, the worst drought in Cape Town for 100 years was in progress, bringing the prospect of serious civil unrest to the city and its townships. Working in this context seemed a daunting prospect.

Once I had engaged with staff and students at UWC, we set up a weekly Taking Liberties creative writing workshop, which we advertised around the campus through the Creative Writing staff and email announcement. Whilst planning the project in the UK, I had developed an ethical framework for the project, approved by the ethics committee at Lancaster University. This aspect of the project required me to ask all project participants to

sign an ethical permissions form which granted me the use of photographic images, sound recordings and written work which students submitted to the project. As part of the ethical process, these submissions were subsequently read and reviewed by each participant, prior to being posted on the Taking Liberties website.

Attendance at the weekly workshop was problematic, as I had anticipated it would be, with a number of core (weekly attending) participants and a number of “floating” participants who attended more randomly. Although such matters might seem trivial in the scheme of South African politics, the lack of a critical mass of attending students proved to be one of the most difficult aspects of my work at UWC. Course commitments, teaching duties, statutory holidays and a national transport strike played their part, as did the interventions of paid work for part-time students and personal issues for others. Any strategically incremental approach risked leaving non-attendees behind as the workshops moved forward. The ethical permissions form in itself proved to be a difficult enterprise and just sending out and getting back signed copies agreeing to the underlying conditions of the project was a major obstacle and risked the perception that what should have been a background activity underwriting the project was actually instrumental to my aims in a major way.

A number of activities went on in parallel: my own weekly workshop, MA workshops with Professors Kobus Moolman and Michael Wessells, personal interviews with PhD students and occasional one-off workshops with students from other departments. The weekly workshops formed the core of my activity and my intention was both to create new website featuring individual writers (photograph, profiles, examples of their writing, publications) and build a new collaborative work. We began our workshops by looking at the rhetoric of freedom, reading an anonymized list of quotations relating to liberty from key political and social activities in the past two hundred years. For participants, it proved impossible to distinguish Joseph Stalin from Nelson Mandela, Adolf Hitler from Thomas Paine, Hillary Clinton from Mahatma Ghandi<sup>xxiv</sup>. In fact, the best clues to who might have said what were stylistic ones derived from the historical period of their utterance, or from circumstantial clues contained in the quotations. What emerged was a sense that notions of liberty had always been a vector for proposed political or social change, that liberty itself was a promiscuous notion that had many bedfellows. This perception that the rhetoric of liberty was allied to the appropriation of power was clearly heightened by the political

rhetoric that was being voiced throughout the South African political scene, as well as the recognition that all sides in the Apartheid struggle had used violence to pursue ideals of freedom. This had left a legacy of repressed guilt and moral contradiction that even the Truth and Reconciliation Committee<sup>xxv</sup> had failed to redress.

From the outset, creative work produced in the weekly workshop was multilingual in the sense that many expressions in the participants' work were rendered into Xhosa or Afrikaans since some significant indigenous idioms or words seemed untranslatable to English. Once a degree of linguistic fluidity had been established in the workshops, I actively solicited formulations expressing liberty in English, Xhosa and Afrikaans. By this time, I had established an email group that was much bigger than the attendance at each weekly workshop and was able to draw upon this wider linguistic pool for contributions to my word-board. Whilst the initial emphasis in the workshops was on individual work, sometimes linked to the other study modules of students, I was carefully moving the group towards a collaborative effort which would be realized after the Easter break, during which I would return to the UK for a few days.

At that point, the clock was ticking against completion of the project, but, using my email group as a project post box, I was able to signal a change of pace. Our explorations in the weekly workshop moved into metaphorical and multilingual territory, towards the generation of a mass of linguistic raw material relating to individual, social and historical experience. Here, liberty was often defined through power relations, through its absence, withdrawal or denial, rather than through its conferral. The generational range in my group ran from about twenty years of age to seventy years of age, spanning a long experience of race relations in South Africa from all sides of the social divide and through many phases of political activity. Older students carried the direct memory of their own experience (and activism in many cases) whilst younger students were acutely aware of the conditions their parents had endured in the township and the many political stages that had led to the Apartheid regime being dismantled. All participants had also experienced the turmoil of contemporary South Africa where enfranchisement often seemed symbolic rather than actual. Personal experience – childhood, education, work, relational issues, sexual identities, mental health issues, the quotidian aspects of domestic life – also often featured in the writers' work, as if they were metonymic of the wider political, social and ethnic tensions.

I returned for this second phase of activity in early April 2018 and found my workshop poorly attended, largely due to participants travelling to homes beyond Cape Town and failing to make it back in time. On the Friday of that week I received a phone call from Kobus Moolman, telling me that Michael Wessells, our head of department, had died after attending my workshop the day before. An expert on Khoisan culture and ecology, a writer and poet, Michael had attended every workshop session. He was a much-loved figure and it's hard to describe the effect his death had on staff and students. Disbelief was followed by a grieving process that undoubtedly strengthened the bond between us whilst also seeming both to question and to underline the importance of what we were trying to achieve. But Michael's contributions to the workshops were also mingled into the linguistic raw material I had been amassing and there was a sense in which completing the project was a way of honouring and fully realizing that contribution.

It was at this half-way point in the project that the collaborative process entered a new and more collective phase through harvesting the multilingual elements from student notebooks, exploring the metaphorical imaging of our abstract notion, generating new work through the workshops and through our email network of just over thirty contributors. If I had initially felt that my project might make contact with groups outside UWC, I had come to realize that the UWC community was diverse in many ways, from age to gender to sexuality and ethnicity, and, given constraints on my time, that this should be my focus. From the outset, I had been taking photographs on the campus and during workshops, so that the website I hoped to build would have a visual narrative and appeal.

In the closing three weeks of the project the process of assembly began, transferring our multilingual material onto strips of paper and assembling these on the large table in the seminar room<sup>xxvi</sup>. An initially random sequence of poetic lines was gradually refined: duplicate images of expressions were reduced to singular occurrence, whilst others were duplicated to form refrains. The poem was shaped by the rhythms of lines and linguistic occurrence and by a tentative narrative form that went in pursuit of layered or multiple meaning. Verbalising the poem at each workshop session also became a shaping mechanism. After each of the closing workshops I typed up a "latest version" of the poem and sent it into the wider email group for comment. So, whilst the smaller workshop group was subject to fluctuation from session to session, the wider group formed a stable sounding-board for the developing work.

A final draft of the poem emerged during my final week in South Africa, one version of many that could have been assembled from the available material. This was brought about through table-top editing: ordering strips of paper with lines of poetry written on them on the huge seminar table, until a version was arrived at. The strips were then glued to pieces of A-4 paper, so that the whole poem took on a modular quality. It was then typed up and edited as a digital version that could be distributed for comments into the email group. Again, Delia Meyer, who had helped me to create a performance of the Many Women, Many Words performance poem at the Writing for Liberty conference, helped to create a scripted version of the text, distributing it between five voices and again as a choral form, thinking of the rhythmical occurrence of individual and collective voices. In the final workshop in the final week of my residency we performed the poem and a simple recording was made using a mobile phone. The result is not a final, finished or even highly polished version of the text. But this very provisionality, the sense that it was a version of versions, seemed essential to a project which had unveiled a tentative relationship with the notion of liberty as reality, symbolic state or teleological process. What seemed to liberate was language itself in the moment of its expression and our spontaneous recording of the poem captures some of that spirit<sup>xxvii</sup>.

This extract from the collaborative performance poem, *Liberty*, gives some sense of its thematic shifts and linguistic modulations:

**Liberty** (extract)

Akuhlanga lungehlanga  
it has not fallen  
before it has fallen

Liberty  
it's a revolution  
a freedom song  
loud and carefree

Free will  
a small house with  
small windows  
a homecoming to  
feasting devils  
decoration for a white

and silver coffin

Imagination

the trick

is not to mind

The mind

a cow held captive

uyinkomo esesitrobheni

Follow the drinking gourd

the northern stars

to a mountain that

sinks into the sea

an ocean rising above it

\* \* \*

Voëlvry

meaning free

as a bird

free as an outcast

a fugitive

meaning

without borders

meaning

without meaning

Freedom is a jealous child

a mumbled prayer

for the dying

a nightmare dream of falling

to the abyss

its fleeting images

of night

A twisted smile

an untouchable gift

an uneaten fruit

red-faced, spittle-spraying

anger, an angel faithful

to your deliverance

a dizzy figure skater

in the fortune teller's

clouded mirror.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The poem's structure reflects its modular development, the words of Xhosa and Afrikaans positioned to allow a translation that is also a form of reiteration and emphasis (especially for South Africans, many of whom would have a grasp of English, Xhosa and of Afrikaans). Lines are freely indented to move away from the certainties of the left-hand margin into a more forward-searching and perhaps tentative sense of form. Our intention was to make the poem navigable for all three language-group speakers. The text was developed through the use of highly figurative language and the key modulations in the poem are not just brought about through language, imagery and voice, but through the shifts in meaning as definitions are offered then become subject to contrapuntal alternatives and patterns of interpretation. The performance context – especially the spatial positioning of performers in relation to audience – also gave the poem a dynamic quality as the dialogic nature of the poem becomes dramatized, with voice taking on a directional quality through a call and answer structure that builds tension and resolution analogous to musical form. Tone or timbre and the relative volume of voices also contributed to the building of meaning in the performance of the text, so that the poem on the page is merely a scripted predictor of the multivalent quality of the poem in performance.

The poem also brought into focus the issues of complex multiple – or aphoristic – meanings in the component languages. In Xhosa, *Akuhlanga lungehlanga* (which forms a refrain in the poem) carries the meaning, “it has not fallen before it has fallen”, but also brings the implication of inevitability, that what has fallen was always going to happen. The Afrikaans word *voëlvry* signifies a free flying bird, but also an escaping prisoner, neatly encapsulating the paradoxes of a liberty that is also constrained or overshadowed by capture. In the same way the reference to the “drinking gourd” implies refreshment and the constellation in the northern sky that led slaves to freedom in North America, whilst also subtly referencing the Apartheid practice of providing segregated drinking fountains for black, white and coloured South African citizens. This cultural and political context that lies behind and within the imagery of the poem offers a further tissue of complexity, contributing to modulations that engage rhythm, repetition, spatiality, cadence, timbre, linguistic identity and meanings enacted within the forward moving reading or performance of the poem.

In largely logistical ways, practice-based projects are subject to their participants in ways that can often be unpredictable. On my return to the UK, I was still asking participants

for their work, checking that they'd supplied ethical compliance forms, advising on which work to use, soliciting photographs, proof-reading and checking copy as it arrived. It wasn't a neat ending to the exploratory process of working with students at UWC and, inevitably, a few individuals who I'd really have liked to feature on the website I was building didn't meet the deadlines that I had to invoke to create closure.

The Taking Liberties website<sup>xxix</sup> now contains photo galleries documenting the workshops and the wider life of the campus at UWC, introductory material and essays by Kobus Moolman, Antjie Krog and Julia Martin, the performance poem (text and recording) with an account of the construction process, as well as a writers gallery with profiles and new writing from 19 individuals who form a cross section of staff members and full or part-time students attending the university in some capacity. The point of my project was to resist the temptation to draw conclusions from the project that then might be seen as a basis from which to draw wider interpretations. My project tried to capture the responses of individuals and groups working at a particular point in history and in response to their own complex histories and current events in South Africa. I have no doubt, despite the very strong sense of support I received from staff and students at UWC (the spirit of *Ubuntu*), that working as a British writer (however much my instinct tries to resist that identity) inevitably affected *my* perceptions, *their* perceptions and some of the resulting writing. And, in a wider sense, it's inevitable that any productive process, such as the making of the performance poem, was anticipated and guided by me rather than emerging through an entirely spontaneously independent process.

Yet each writer remained free to develop their work within the broad remit of the project. These flexible parameters meant that I never told them what to write or what not to write. Working multilingually meant relinquishing my control of process and using the expertise of the participants themselves to raise and resolve linguistic and conceptual issues relating to language and liberty. That liberty is an illusory ideal was self-evident from the outset, but I would argue that writing itself constitutes an exploration of the parameters of liberty within and through the self, as well as with reference to external events. Creative writing, in this sense, can validate personal experience that may seem to stand outside history as nugatory or unacknowledged. The act of writing from that experience and re-shaping it in language may give it a greater resilience, durability and social standing than its retention in the subjective and constantly re-shaping mechanisms of emotion and memory.



There was a definite sense that our work was a form of bearing witness to the experience of former generations and to a fractured and often incoherent sense of society in which individuals were trying to function and test their agency and potential for change. To understand liberty as an imaginary is to recognise both its power and its mercurial manifestations in a fraught reality. To acknowledge a lack of liberty is perhaps to understand the points at which liberty has been withheld and where it might begin to be engendered when the desire and needs of individuals interlock with wider social and linguistic identities that are forms of mobility rather than cultural fixities.

To return to the UK context, the discomfort of Creative Writing practitioners within the academy is not yet resolved. It may never be, since that is also an anticipated liberty, a fleeting imaginary. The neo-liberalism enshrined in the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act<sup>xxx</sup> is creating a paradoxical and conflicted HE environment in which universities are simultaneously collaborators and competitors (embodied in the UK Research Council consortiums that compete for and share PhD funding, to take one example). As long as Creative Writing attracts students and continues to expand from print and performance-based production into digital ones, the market will sustain it. But we need a new accommodation with pre-existing, more traditional conceptions, of research and research practice: a recognition that creative writing in its many manifestations is – *sui generis* – a contribution to human understanding and knowledge and one that can be both intellectually and emotionally affective. Many of the problems that face humanity in the 21st century – from climate change to poverty, from forms of religious and ethnic radicalization to the frailty of the democratic franchise – seem to call out for such holistic forms of investigative endeavour. This is not merely a version of the old debate about healing schisms between the science and humanities but a debate about a fracture that is in danger of running between creative practice and the theorised practice of our closest neighbours in the Humanities. To consider one example of that state of apartheid, and in terms of internationalism and international research agendas, not one of the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals<sup>xxxii</sup> deals directly with culture and cultural values. Those principles have underwritten the £1.5 billion pounds sterling of funding tipped into the Global Challenges Research Fund<sup>xxxiii</sup>, where each project has to show the economic benefit of an award. That seems a tragic underestimation of the range of human need, the potential of the cultural dimension to evolve and adapt to circumstances, and the role of arts practice

in democratizing and initiating change. Because change, if it begins anywhere, surely begins within the individual self and is expressed and pursued through the unfurling and multivalent meanings of the word as well as the generative silences that surround it.

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### **Appendix I**

#### **Quotations on Liberty**

“What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or in the holy name of liberty or democracy?” — Mahatma Gandhi

“It is difficult for me to imagine what “personal liberty” is enjoyed by an unemployed hungry person. True freedom can only be where there is no exploitation and oppression of one person by another; where there is not unemployment, and where a person is not living in fear of losing his job, his home and his bread. Only in such a society personal and any other freedom can exist for real and not on paper.” — Joseph Stalin

“If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.” — George Orwell

“When there are no ceilings, the sky's the limit.” — Hillary Clinton

“For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” — Nelson Mandela

“The business of the State is to use its organizing powers for the purpose of furnishing the necessary conditions which allow this people freely to unfold its creative faculties.” – Adolf Hitler

“A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury.” – John Stuart Mill

“I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.” — Audre Lorde

“The end may justify the means as long as there is something that justifies the end.”  
— Leon Trotsky

“My liberty depends on your being free too.” – Barack Obama

“The most important democratic right for me is the right not to vote. What is the point in voting if you know all the candidates are only bent on bettering their own lives and empowering their relatives at the expense of all?” – Nkosinathi Sithole

“A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the People to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.” – 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, USA Constitution

“But words are things, and a small drop of ink,  
Falling, like dew, upon a thought produces  
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions think.” — George Gordon Byron

“Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.” — John Milton

“I'm a supporter of gay rights. And not a closet supporter either. From the time I was a kid, I have never been able to understand attacks upon the gay community. There are so many qualities that make up a human being... by the time I get through with all the things that I really admire about people, what they do with their private parts is probably so low on the list that it is irrelevant.” – Paul Newman

“Ignorance is of a peculiar nature: once dispelled, it is impossible to re-establish it. It is not originally a thing of itself, but is only the absence of knowledge; and though man may be kept ignorant, he cannot be made ignorant.” – Thomas Paine

“Human beings are inviolable. Every human being shall be entitled to respect for his life and the integrity of his person. No one may be arbitrarily deprived of this right.” – African Charter on Human and People's Rights

“This is my doctrine: Give every other human being every right you claim for yourself.”

– Robert G. Ingersoll

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

–Universal Declaration of Human Rights

“Until we are all free, we are none of us free.” — Emma Lazarus

“Understand that sexuality is as wide as the sea. Understand that your morality is not law. Understand that we are you. Understand that if we decide to have sex whether safe, safer, or unsafe, it is our decision and you have no rights in our lovemaking.” – Derek Jarman

“Together, hand in hand, with our matches and our necklaces, we shall liberate this country.” – Winnie Mandela

“I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed, without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government.” — Martin Luther King Jr.

“I myself have never precisely been able to find out what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat.” – Rebecca West



## Appendix II

### **Liberty**

*In memory of Michael Wessels*

Akuhlanga lungehlanga  
it has not fallen  
before it has fallen

Liberty  
its a revolution  
a freedom song  
loud and carefree

Free will  
a small house with  
small windows  
a homecoming to  
feasting devils  
decoration for a white  
and silver coffin

Imagination  
the trick  
is not to mind

The mind  
a cow held captive  
uyinkomo esesitrobheni

Follow the drinking gourd  
the northern stars  
to a mountain that  
sinks into the sea  
an ocean rising above it

\* \* \*

Voëlvry  
meaning free  
as a bird  
free as an outcast  
a fugitive  
meaning  
without borders  
meaning  
without meaning

Freedom is a jealous child  
a mumbled prayer  
for the dying  
a nightmare dream of falling  
to the abyss  
its fleeting images  
of night

A twisted smile  
an untouchable gift  
an uneaten fruit  
red-faced, spittle-spraying  
anger, an angel faithful  
to your deliverance  
a dizzy figure skater  
in the fortune teller's  
clouded mirror

\* \* \*

Indlovu ayisindwa ngumboko wayo  
an elephant is not burdened  
by its own trunk

Amatsha ntliziyo ngawo ahleliyo  
truth sets you free

Sweet release!

Truth is that knife slipping  
across your fingertips  
a Rubik's cube  
a squawking guineafowl  
dodging traffic  
a dream incinerated

A prayer for  
the children  
an ocean the size  
of a raindrop  
in freefall  
free as vapour  
free as air  
or breath

\* \* \*

A mythical bird  
in an old baobab  
forever young

A monster  
misunderstood  
a monstrous  
misunderstanding

Mind forged manacles  
mental freedom

Break down the walls!

Reclaim the streets!

Spring to the mountains!

ukuntingela entabeni!  
ukuntingela entabeni!

\* \* \*

A life without freedom  
is a body  
without a soul

Akuhlanga lungehlanga  
it has not fallen before  
it has fallen  
that window  
on darkness  
that mirror  
of disparity

\* \* \*

Vryheid!  
Vryheid!  
Vryheid!

Freedom is trying  
to pronounce  
itself  
to say itself  
speaking in the tongues  
of liberty  
of nakedness  
Inkululeko

\* \* \*

Free speech  
is the key  
to jail cell doors  
a white lie exposing  
subtle truth  
without shadow  
without reflection  
a constant nightmare  
a fading dream

Inkululeko  
freedom is a naked  
fugitive  
unchained

\* \* \*

Voëlvry  
a bird  
untethered

Ukhululekile  
a falcon  
set free

Wathinta abafazi  
you strike a woman

wathinta imbokodo  
you strike a rock

Voestek!

\* \* \*

Ukugqabadula  
is to gallop away  
to flee to freedom

Limping, wounded  
pale as death  
at the shining hour  
the unnavigable river  
flowing through boulders  
a dance  
with unknown steps.

Ibalek'u moya  
free as wind  
as air  
as breath

An angel with black wings  
a weeping willow  
a circus dream



loud and carefree  
a feral creature

I'd rather die  
on my feet  
than live as a secret  
than live  
on my knees

• • •

Ibalek'u moya  
free as wind in  
a hawk's wings

Voëlvry  
a fugitive  
on the loose  
a dream bird

Akuhlanga lungehlanga  
it has not fallen  
before it has fallen  
though it will always fall  
that window on darkness  
that mirror of disparity

Akuhlanga lungehlanga  
Akuhlanga lungehlanga

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