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We are the Sun: Multilingual collaborative songwriting as a hospitable, embodied and political process

LUCY CATHCART FRÖDÉN

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Multilingual approaches to collaborative creativity can be seen as one form of resistance to inequality and neo-colonialism, through the potential to decentre the English language, unsettle entrenched linguistic hierarchies, and open up spaces of linguistic hospitality (Ricoeur, 2006). This article will share a song written in collaboration with displaced young people, in order to reflect on ways in which multilingualism in creative processes and performance might play a role in fostering solidarity and mutual care. The song, the writing process and the participants' reflections together act as a lens through which to observe small but significant shifts that can happen when linguistic repertoires beyond the dominant language are welcomed into a shared creative space. Multilingual approaches here are not seen as a quick-fix solution to systemic injustice, but as one way to illuminate questions of power and audibility in socially-engaged arts practice..

Keywords: Songwriting, multilingualism, collaboration, socially-engaged arts practice

We are the Sun

VERSE 1

I am a unicorn, I am a flower
I am a robin, a high tower
I am a wave, I am a tree
I am a lighthouse, I am green
I am the town on a Friday night
I am a magpie, a lucky sight
I'm a sweet potato, surprise inside
I am a well-worn scarf, nothing to hide.

CHORUS 1

I am the sun
Nos somos o sol (Portuguese)
Ana alshams (Arabic)
Awa ni Orun (Yoruba)

VERSE 2

I am an ant, never stopping
I am a robin, hear me singing
I am a building, I'll keep you safe
I am a survivor, a brown bear
I am a listener, I am a fighter
I am a daughter, I am a sister
I am a rope bridge, a connection
I am an old coastal ruin.

CHORUS 2

Nnammal Suryan Aannu (Malayalam)

Sisi ni jua (Swahili)

Yo soy el sol (Spanish)

Kita adalah matahari (Indonesian)

I am the sun

We are the sun

*Music and lyrics by Asma, Fatma, Christianah, Nuha,
Alhan, Olda, Shobhita, Vanessa, Clare, Donna and Lucy
Recorded at Chem19 Studios
Produced by Donna Maciocia
Mixed and mastered by Jamie Savage*

Introduction

It is strange to see the above lyrics in tidy, symmetrical lines, flat and immobile, when the song they belong to is so filled with movement, texture and vitality. The words come alive when voiced by the young women who wrote them, and I recommend that you begin your reading of this paper by having a listen, here.

<https://soundcloud.com/ydsa-music/1-we-are-the-sun?in=ydsa-music/sets/hidden-rhythms>

This paper emerges from a practice-based PhD that uses collaborative and often multilingual songwriting to explore how shared creativity facilitates human connection. The focus here will be on a series of three weekend songwriting workshops with young people from minority ethnic backgrounds in Glasgow, which I co-facilitated with Clare McBrien, Donna Maciocia and Diljeet Bhachu. The first two workshops were hosted through the Youth Community Support Agency, with around eight to twelve participants, as part of a project

that came to be known as *Hidden Rhythms*. The final workshop was hosted at a later date, at arts organisation Vox Liminis, and involved five participants. The young people were from a wide range of ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds, and most had experience of the asylum process. A number of songs were created as part of these workshops, and you can listen to a selection of them here.

<https://soundcloud.com/yкса-music/sets/hidden-rhythms>

In the context of this research, collaborative songwriting creates spaces for embodied knowledge creation through arts praxis, following Trimmingham (2002) and Nelson (2013). By sharing one of our songs alongside field notes, co-writers' perspectives and theoretical points of connection, this article aims to reflect on the potential of multilingualism in the context of intercultural co-creative encounters. The song and conversations referenced here are shared with the generous permission of the co-writers and the co-facilitators, as detailed in the acknowledgements.

This article will begin by discussing linguistic hostility and hospitality in the context of broader discourses of integration in the UK, and considering how multilingual creative encounters could support a shift from hostility towards conviviality. Then it will discuss three areas of reflection from the research, weaving together theory, practice and practical suggestions for creative collaborations across cultural and linguistic differences. By shining a light on some small moments of connection between differently situated people, I will explore how shared music-making might connect us, and how language and translation intersect with participatory arts processes.

It is important to acknowledge my own positionality at the outset. As a white, middle-class, educated, European woman, I am profoundly and uncomfortably aware of my

own privilege, and my own complicity in the structures and systems that maintain a status quo that is oppressive for the majority of people on the planet, in economic, political, ecological, social and cultural terms. I write not from the detached position of an observer, but from the engaged position of someone trying to listen and learn, to take meaningful action, and to play a part in finding new forms of solidarity and hospitality, aware that this will be messy, awkward and often inadequate¹.

Integration, hospitality and language— beyond binaries

This special issue takes up the theme of ‘Performing the North / South’, and the contribution of this article is to reflect on multilingual co-creation as one way to create spaces that are more capacious and relational than those focused on difference and on binary oppositions. In order to frame and contextualise this argument, we must first define what is meant by some of the key terms and suggest a movement away from understandings of these concepts that focus on binaries and differences.

The doctoral research from which this paper emerges considers integration in collaboration with two groups of people—people who have experience of the criminal justice system, and people who have been forcibly displaced. The intention of the research is not to explore the experience of migration, nor of the criminal justice system, nor to draw parallels or comparisons between these two groups. The research is located with these groups because it builds on my own previous experiences of working in community development projects alongside people facing these sets of circumstances. Rather than focusing on migration or criminalisation, the research creates spaces to consider what happens after these experiences, and how we might create conditions for community to thrive and meaningful connections to be made. This article focuses on a short series of creative research encounters with young people who have

migrated, and there is not scope here to discuss criminal justice-related aspects of the work².

The term 'integration' is a problematic one, often used in the political arena as a synonym for assimilation, a 'conformance by outsiders with a normative, universal, and static national citizen subject' (McPherson, 2010, p.546). It is important to state that this research envisions integration differently, as a collective flourishing; an inclusive network of community relationships characterised by respect, solidarity and mutual care. This is a complex process of mutual accommodation, requiring action and change from all involved (Ager and Strang, 2008, p.177).

Just as 'integration' is a contested term, so too is 'hospitality'—too often understood as a binary situation where a benevolent and generous host holds all the assets and power, opening their home to a guest who is foreign, needy, and passive. Interestingly, the Latin root, 'hospes' can mean host, guest or stranger, which hints at a far less fixed definition of roles. I understand the term as a shared relational process where the roles of host and guest can be fluid, and where varied and reciprocal gestures of welcome are made. These may be physical (e.g. sharing food, making a cup of tea) or symbolic (e.g. sharing language, listening to one another). Lee Higgins conceptualises the 'community' in community music as hospitality: 'the making of time for another and the invitation to become included [...] an ethical action toward a relationship to another person' (Higgins, 2012, p.108). The value of this 'making of time' for one another is not to be underestimated, especially in the context of our rushed modern lifestyles, where time is so heavily monetised by market economics and where busyness and stress become a kind of status symbol.

In translation theory, Ricoeur describes 'linguistic hospitality' as an approach 'where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one's

welcoming house' (Ricoeur, 2006, p.10). I draw on this concept for a participatory arts context, where I define linguistic hospitality as a way of working that actively welcomes languages other than the dominant one into a shared space or a creative process, and where the guest / host boundary is fluid and permeable. This permeability is possible because we all have a language to share, whereas in a traditional understanding of domestic hospitality, we might assume that ownership of a space is required, immediately implying a potential inequality—although Derrida and Dufourmantelle question this assumption: 'is it necessary to start from the certain existence of a dwelling, or is it rather only starting from the dislocation of the shelterless, the homeless, that the authenticity of hospitality can open up?' (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 2000, p.56).

Postcolonial discourses in educational, academic, political, cultural contexts are often characterised by binary oppositions: North / South, coloniser / colonised, centre / periphery. There is no question that this is a necessary lens, highlighting the many oppressions and brutalities of centuries of colonial history, the values of which continue to underpin unjust and racialised systems at every level of society. Those of us in a position of privilege and from a 'colonising' background need to continually work to recognise and dismantle the legacies of colonialism that are all around us.

At the same time, too inflexible a focus on binaries can draw 'thick lines where porosity exists' (Phipps, 2019, p.8), oversimplifying complex and layered intercultural dynamics and perpetuating the very divisions that many seek to work together to overcome. Haifa Alfaisal's work helpfully explores how 'the dichotomising framework that postcolonialism applies to indigenous epistemologies is symptomatic of a profound shortcoming. This concerns postcolonialism's lack of a critical stance towards its own epistemological foundations' (Alfaisal, 2011, p.24).

In a community arts context, an approach that emphasises difference and binaries can lead to the creation of work intended to provoke empathy or pity from dominant groups towards marginalised groups. Indeed, projects that seek to instrumentalise the power of art to project a certain image or provoke a certain response can inadvertently objectify, sensationalise, flatten or homogenise unique and unrepeatable life experiences. Catrin Evans' groundbreaking work reveals and critiques this dynamic in community arts:

I would welcome participatory arts practitioners moving away from the work of solely humanising or provoking empathy [...] and instead building artistic spaces where inter-relations and shared moments of creation and responsibility can form the basis for localised solidarity (Evans, 2019, p.50).

Multilingual approaches to the creative process can constitute one way to help move away from binaries and towards more solidary and equitable spaces by 'decentering the dominant group' (Hill Collins, 1990, p.237) and shifting our perceptions of where knowledge is held. My experience from this research suggests that inviting languages other than English into our interactions can help engender more hospitable, democratic, and unpredictable spaces in which to co-create. Opening our ears and minds up to experiencing and valuing other languages is particularly meaningful in a society that often takes a deficit-based view of language skills, where the lack of English of people from migrant backgrounds is lamented, while their skills in languages other than English, which have the potential to greatly enrich our culture, are largely ignored (Scanlan, 2007, p.3).

In our multicultural and multilingual urban populations, language continues to function as a clear marker of 'us and them', an unhelpful binary. 'More than any other aspect of our social life, language, in its various modes,

participates in the constant struggle to define some version of our “self” over and against some “other”...’ (Ashcroft, 2009, p.96). Indeed, the move towards more explicitly racialised and discriminatory political and media rhetoric since the 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union seems to have legitimised an outpouring of racist behaviour across the UK. One example was a sign put up in a Norwich tower block wishing residents a ‘Happy Brexit Day’ and stating ‘as we finally have our great country back we feel there is one rule that needs to be made clear to Winchester Tower residents. We do not tolerate people speaking other languages than English in the flats.’ (BBC, 2020a) Thankfully, this was far from an uncontested act—dozens of residents responded by putting up messages of kindness and welcome (BBC, 2020b). Nonetheless, this episode demonstrates that language continues to be ‘a place of struggle’ (hooks, 1989, p.16).

It is against the backdrop of this bitterly divided, deeply prejudiced and fearful nation that examples of linguistic hospitality, diversity and openness might be able to play a role in shifting the public discourse towards a more positive relationship with languages, and in so doing, with integration in general. It is widely recognised that language plays a crucial role in the construction of identity (see for example, Stroinska, 2003), which may explain why some feel threatened by exposure to unfamiliar languages. However, our languages are not static or immutable, but constantly evolving, and Ashcroft reminds us of the potential for language to be a place of encounter:

The discovery we make is that language, far from being a mode of being locked up in a particular culture, is already an ambivalent ‘third space’ between people, a transcultural space that defies the essential location of subjects. (Ashcroft, 2009, p.96)

So how might we engender and inhabit such transcultural spaces? I would argue that multilingual approaches can begin to help us shift power and focus towards the margins; create space for each unique voice, and position our creative work in a broader political context.

‘We are the sun’: peripheries and centres

‘We are the Sun’ was the first song to emerge from the workshops. It came together rapidly on the first evening we spent together. We began with an exercise where we reflected on all the different kinds of identity that might be assigned to us by others—a friend, a student, a migrant, a daughter. We drew around our hands and wrote these inside our handprints. Then we filled the rest of the paper with more poetic or metaphorical ways we might see ourselves: I am a wave, a lighthouse, a sweet potato. The line ‘I am the sun’ became the refrain of the song, moving to ‘we are the sun’, and together we translated it into all the languages spoken in the room. Each participant tutored us as a group in how to spell and pronounce the words from their language.

We found ourselves laughing, connecting, as we awkwardly tasted unfamiliar syllables, trying, failing, and trying again. Stumbling over each other's languages, like tree roots on a forest path, made us all slow down. We discovered that these linguistic roots, that hold us up and anchor us down at the same time, are complex and interconnected. Listening to and emulating one another's languages led to a more relational approach, where we as facilitators felt some of the ‘linguistic incompetence’ (Phipps, 2013, p.329) and vulnerability of a beginner, entering a place of new possibilities.

In symbolic terms the song came to represent a number of transitions—from being stereotyped in narrow, limiting or negative terms, to having freedom to claim multiple and complex identities; from ‘I’ to ‘we’; and from monolingual to multilingual. Although not explicitly political, the song's use of six minority languages (in

relation to UK culture) became an exhortation to welcome and tune in to unfamiliar words and sonic textures, and their speakers.

There is resonance here with the centre / periphery dichotomy present in postcolonial discourses. How do we acknowledge the profound inequalities in the distribution of resources and opportunities between the centre and the periphery, without taking an approach that emphasises difference over commonality and connection? Feminist theorist and social activist bell hooks powerfully dissects the way that her academic colleagues' fixation with difference and 'the other' became a form of colonisation in itself:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the coloniser, the speaking subject and you are now at the centre of my talk (hooks, 1989, p.22).

Her words are, and should be, a clarion call for participatory arts work to move away from the familiar pattern of stories from the margins retold by voices from the centre. Hooks exhortation is not to ignore difference, but to consider whose voices are given space to be heard and whose are silenced, and to emphasise the agency of those in the margins, which she sees as 'not a site of domination but a place of resistance' (hooks, 1989, p.22).

I would argue that moves towards multilingualism, however inadequate, may be one step towards making it possible for all the voices present in a space to be heard

more fully. Listening to each other's unfamiliar words might make more apparent the unique expertise and situated knowledge that lies within each individual. In the case of our song, it is not more than a playful sketch or a fleeting gesture, but it does create space for languages and voices that are peripheral in relation to anglophone culture to be heard—and indeed for the co-writers to position themselves metaphorically at the very centre of the solar system.

A field note from one of the songwriting weekends illustrates how opening up to other languages also seemed to facilitate a shift in power dynamics. The youngest participant in this workshop was a native Spanish speaker, who was also new to the group. He co-wrote a hip-hop song with two other people, which featured a section of rapping in Spanish. Prior to performing the song, he had been shy and reserved in the group. This observation comes from a field note I wrote immediately after the performance.

After performing, J expressed himself more assertively than previously. It was like there was a part of him that was expressed through that language that could take control of the space or claim power in a new way. When somebody else, an older and more vocal member of the group, asked, “what was that, was it English, was it Arabic?”—J sat up straight and said confidently, “no it was Spanish” with a visible sense of pride in holding that knowledge. Then one of the facilitators offered to share a translation and, again assertively and confidently J said, “no, I don’t want to share the translation”. He hadn’t expressed himself this way in the space before but he obviously felt some ownership over the language and the song, and perhaps then also over the situation (Cathcart Frödén, 2018).

These are tiny interactions, and not in themselves revolutionary. But what is worth mentioning here is the organic way that the change in power dynamics came about. As the language itself took up space, it seemed to confer authority on its speaker, realigning our perceptions of knowledge distribution and making more profound changes in social interactions possible.

For those of us involved in academic work or community arts practice with people who have migrated, how can this learning inform our practice? Drawing from postcolonial theory, we can consider our group dynamics in relation to the unequal distribution of power associated with the centre and periphery, and how we might redistribute that power through listening, humility, and 'linguistic incompetence' (Phipps, 2013, p.329). We can also be mindful to ensure languages do not exclude, in situations where some group members have a shared language that others do not speak, but that we form collective habits around openness, curiosity and polyphony in relation to language. Further, we can embrace and enjoy the inherent sense of playfulness and connection in 'tripping over one another's roots' as we attempt to sound new and unfamiliar words.

'Whatever is hiding inside you': voices and bodies

A recurring theme in the research has been voice. Our language is, of course, mediated primarily by our voices—long before the written word gets involved (Thiong'o, 2013, p.159). From the moment we are born, our voices connect us with those closest to us. Bound up with the machinery of our breathing and our survival from moment to moment, our vocal chords mediate our needs, our fears, our grief, our laughter and our joy.

Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Caverero considers the voice an embodied marker of our uniqueness as humans, whereby our physical bodies give each of us a

distinct voice, allowing us to connect through the resonance between the vibrations of one person's 'throat of flesh' (p. 198) and another's ear (Cavarero, 2003, p.178). Her work envisions new ways to break out from the patriarchal symbolic order, using 'a politics of voices' to form provisional spaces, places of resignification, where meanings, concepts and categories can be broken down and new relations can grow, based on the reciprocal exchange of vocal communication of voices (Cavarero, 2003, p.197). While Cavarero's work focuses on resisting the oppression of the patriarchal ordering of society, we can just as easily discern its value in resisting racialised and colonial structures.

The voice does not engage in masquerade; indeed, it strips away masks from the word. The word can say anything and its opposite. No matter what it says, the voice communicates first and always one thing: the uniqueness of she or he who emits it (Cavarero, 2003, translation in Smart, 2005, p.107).

This is not to say that our vocalisations cannot be violent or harmful or deceitful, but it does imply relationship: 'a mutual presence of speakers' (Cecconi, 2005, p.100). Crucially, then, the emphasis is on the very act of vocalisation and its relational and political potential, 'a sonic self-revelation that exceeds the linguistic register of meaning' (Cavarero, 2003, p.192).

In terms of practice, this understanding of the human voice allows us to loosen the ties that connect words to meaning, to be content to enjoy hearing without immediately understanding, to notice the shapes of new sounds and resonances, and to create auditory space for each person's individual vocalisations. Voice can also be conceptualised more broadly here. In practice, some participants in the songwriting workshops were eager to sing, while others enjoyed the creative process but were not comfortable singing at all. Broadening the concept of voice in a musical context beyond singing to mean a

unique, embodied, auditory contribution to the song, this could take the form of spoken word or rap, humming, clapping or beating a drum.

This capacious conceptualisation of voice concerns the *how* of personal expression. Inextricably entangled with this is the question of *what* we choose to express through the creative process, and Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us this is an equally embodied process:

For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the Earth's body—stone, sky, liquid, soil (Anzaldúa, 2007, p.75).

If there is freedom to be found in creating and expressing ourselves in ways that are rooted in our embodied experience, this is not without irony when the physical body in which this expression is rooted is very far from free. For the young women of colour involved in writing 'We are the Sun', Anzaldúa's 'pulling of flesh' is a brutal, daily reality. Located in bodies heavily policed by the UK's deliberately hostile environment (Gentleman, 2019) and subject to discrimination and precarious living conditions on the multiple grounds of race, gender and immigration status, the creative process is perhaps both a route to freedom and a painful reminder of a lack thereof.

In reflecting on voice and embodied creative practice, we can also consider performance. Following the first songwriting workshop, the group were approached and invited to perform 'We are the Sun' on the main stage in Glasgow's George Square as part of the cultural programme accompanying the city's hosting of the 2018 European Championships. After this experience I asked some of the participants to reflect on their experience of

songwriting and performing. Their responses resonate with Cavarero's philosophy in the sense that they refer to the experience of writing and performing songs as an embodied one, where the connection between the emotional and the physical is clear. Asma talked about having the opportunity to 'take out whatever is hiding inside you'. Nuha talked about songwriting as expressing "a story of something you can't really say or explain but [...] it turns out into your whole heart that you can't really speak but you put into words". Shobhita talks about this emotional release "I think I just had a lot of emotion inside, and I was, like in my previous life I had to shove it down and not be able to show a lot of things [...] I had a lot of emotion built up here and I just needed to spread it to the world rather than silencing it. Yeah!"

When the discussion turned to the multilingual chorus of the song, and the experience of performing it together, Nuha commented: "That made it amazing, like it made it feel like, you know, without bloodline you're still like family." Fatma agreed: "It feels like we are all one person and we all come from one place". These comments strike me as beautiful ways to describe the process of integration. Paradoxically perhaps, by highlighting all our different linguistic backgrounds, and celebrating them through collective vocalisation, what we held in common became more apparent and audible than the differences between us.

This focus on embodied expression can help to create space to acknowledge and attend to each other's physical needs as part of the co-creative process. Caring for one another through gestures of reciprocal hospitality became an increasingly significant feature of the songwriting weekends: sharing responsibility for feeding one another or making each other cups of tea. This seemed to echo the linguistic dynamics, as reciprocity in food and vocalisation emerged as analogous ways to connect and nourish one another. On one of the later weekends, I was working on a song with Christianah, a co-writer I had worked with before, and noticed a change in our shared process:

Songwriting with Christianah the first time round, in the main space, I recall an uncomfortable sense that she was deferring to me, that I was in control of the direction of the song. With this second co-write, we were in the kitchen. She was cooking Nigerian food for everyone's lunch, and took charge of the space, delegating tasks to me. Then once most of the cooking was done and Christianah was doing the finishing touches, I sat down at the kitchen table to work on her song, asking her questions about it and taking notes. She was immediately much more assertive than the last time we had worked together—"no I don't want to talk about that" or "I want the song to be more about X". This felt like a significant shift—she was articulating the vision and I was just helping her to realise it—just like the cooking (Cathcart Frödén, 2018).

In considering collaborative practice, the centrality of voice cannot be overstated. Opening up space to listen to everyone's vocalisations—be they spoken, sung, wordy or wordless, linguistically comprehensible or perceived simply as sonic and vocal texture—can be received by those involved as a moment of connection, a way to democratise a space and share power, and in showing mutual care, as a profoundly political act. This is recognised by Leah Bassel in her monograph *The Politics of Listening*, where she defends the importance of micropolitics: face-to-face practices that challenge inaudibility and political inequality (Bassel, 2017). When members of dominant groups focus on listening, face-to-face encounters can become unique sites of learning and growth. In interactions with people from a minority linguistic background, an emphasis on listening can allow space for the interlocutor's other languages to emerge. Alison Phipps reminds us that caring for one another's languages is not dry or dull but something that can be woven into the fabric of our lives and relationships in organic and life-giving ways:

A decolonial multilinguality would be more like a dance than a panopticon. It would be learned standing, moving, walking and especially eating. Lessons would begin in music, as a song is easier for the vocal training of pronunciation than speech. A decolonial multilinguality would take to the streets and learn from many patient speakers; it would be part of a befriending, community practice, a purposeful consideration of how the world around us is shared in speech (Phipps, 2019, p.92).

‘Strike a match’: Solidarity and a politics of noticing

At the end of each songwriting weekend, we tentatively performed our newborn songs to each other—always a uniquely moving, slightly scary and deeply memorable experience. On listening back to one of these moments, I was struck by the ending of the song that Christianah and I wrote together in the kitchen. She is on lead vocals, and at the end she repeats the chorus refrain “strike a match and make my own flame”. As Christianah's voice begins to fade out, everyone else in the room gradually picks up the refrain, until we are all singing together, in quiet but persistent unison.

There is something in this moment that is striking, goose-pimpling even, and difficult to articulate; the way Christianah's rich, soulful voice settles in to a brand new song; the way the other voices in unison feel like they are all supporting one another rather than vying for attention. It is the kind of sound that can only be achieved when the focus of the singers is on listening, a kind of vocal solidarity, where every voice can be heard. This is not a protest song, nor a song trying to influence or persuade the listener of something, nor seeking to provoke empathy, nor a song whose lyrical content would be described as political in any way. And yet this collective, embodied expression of mutual care seems profoundly political.

Why is this so? Is it just the emotion of the moment? After all, one of the strengths of community arts practice can be the creation of a temporary bubble, a liminal and transient space where participants feel a freedom to express themselves and connect. This can often be a positive experience with a movement towards equality at its core (Higgins, 2012). Within this affective space, the way this line is sung evokes a unity that could be described as prefigurative—‘envisioning and enacting the interventions of a world to come’ (Brown, 2019, p.80). What makes this moment feel weighty and significant, then, is perhaps the contrast between this room and the world outside its walls. As soon as we step outside our temporary creative bubble, we find ourselves back in the hostile environment, in a world where ‘everything is political and the choice to be “apolitical” is usually just an endorsement of the status quo’ (Solnit, interviewed by Cohen, 2009). Where ‘washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral’ (Freire, 1985, p.122). So how do we go about situating our community arts practice, or our research inquiry, within a wider political context?

Returning to Bassel's *The Politics of Listening* is a good starting point, and I suggest that we add to this a ‘politics of noticing’. A politics of noticing means not only being present enough to observe the details and complexities of moments like the one just described, but also placing these moments in a wider socio-political context. Doing so makes clear not only the ephemerality of the shared creative experience, but also its potential to create imaginaries that sustain hope in circumstances of precarity and oppression.

A politics of noticing means tuning in to what is happening at the fringes of our encounters with collaborators who are subject to systemic violence. Noticing when participants leave early with lined faces to go and report at the Home Office, or have just received an official letter with worrying content, or do not turn up

because they have been told they need to vacate their accommodation in a matter of hours. And not just noticing but taking responsibility for our complicity with these unjust systems and working towards structural reform in tangible ways—even if it is hard to know how. Solidarity takes many forms but is always rooted in action to resist oppression and undertaking such action in reflective ways can bring about what Freire calls ‘conscientização’ or ‘learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality’ (Freire, 1970, p.9 [translator's note]).

For practitioners in participatory and socially-engaged arts, this can be an uncomfortable process of recognising one’s own complicity and inadequacy in the face of systemic injustice. Resistance to colonial hierarchies cannot co-exist with the perpetuation of the status quo, as Frantz Fanon makes clear:

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. (Fanon, 1963, p.36)

For practitioners of collaborative and socially-engaged arts who are not affected by the forms of oppression to which our collaborators are subject, our encounters constitute a space in which to listen and learn, and to be challenged. Instead of claiming ‘ignorance of unjust silencing’ (Mihai, 2018), this is an opportunity to listen to voices that have been suppressed, and to approach reflexivity not as a source of comfort but as a ‘practice of confounding disruptions’ (Pillow, 2003, p. 192).

Collaborative practice, then, can and should be an unsettling force. Indeed, Ida Danewid warns against a move to frame discourses of integration in terms of ‘empathy, generosity and hospitality’, suggesting that this

reinforces an image of the dominant, colonising forces as benevolent, and avoids the more difficult questions of 'responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform' (Danewid, 2017, p.1675). I agree with Danewid's critique of responses that frame the action of dominant groups in terms of empathy or generosity. Reciprocal hospitality, however, has emerged repeatedly through this research as something vital and life-giving, leading to greater solidarity. Following Derrida, Urie et al conceptualise hospitality as something that:

'interrupts our selves and disrupts our social settings [...] we argue that these interruptions and disruptions are necessary to and critical in the project of imagining something better than the hostility that prevails today' (Urie et al, 2019, p.80).

Collaborative acts that involve learning new words, inhabiting the linguistic margins, and meeting in the hinterlands between languages can involve both risk and reward. Our collective making may be slowed down, there may be misunderstandings or confused silences, or we may all feel out of our depth. Perhaps this is just the kind of interruption that can help to disrupt the status quo and offer a new vocabulary to imagine something better.

Concluding Thoughts

At this point, you are invited once again to listen to the voices on the recording of 'We are the Sun', and to consider the kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing that are present in the song. The song is a simple one, but both its form and its content refuse to conform to binary constructs or flattened identity categories that characterise oppressed groups as 'depleted, ruined, and hopeless' (Tuck, 2009). Instead, the co-writers collectively claim auditory and metaphorical space, painting pictures of complex and layered identities. By bringing their rich linguistic repertoires to the creative process, the co-

writers enabled a unique combination of the hospitable, the embodied and the political in our collaboration.

Gloria Andalzúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera* (1987), although based on the Chicana and mestiza experience in Texas, resonates with some of the hierarchies of language we encounter in the UK: 'So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.' (Andalzúa, p.59)

This idea of taking pride, I think, is a fitting phrase on which to end. We cannot give pride. We can only take pride: it has to be claimed—sometimes against the odds. When you are surrounded by a society that devalues your background, your skin colour or your language, taking pride is a bold, courageous and political act. Nuha, one of the inspiring young women who wrote and performed 'We are the Sun', tells us this:

"I felt like I was telling a story to them but on the stage, through lyrics and metaphors, and everyone was just listening and understanding... even though I was looking at the paper the whole time... I kind of sneak peeked... And... it just feels good to, you know, share. I'm glad I did it. I felt so proud of myself."

Notes

1. Of course, stating my positionality does not make the difficult ethical questions about power and representation in this research go away. Early in my PhD, I asked my supervisor, Professor Alison Phipps, about uncomfortable gut feelings regarding privilege and complicity. She assured me that this was not something to suppress or overcome, but to listen to, and that 'if that knot in your stomach ever goes away, then you're not doing this right'. There is resonance here with Pillow's 'reflexivities of discomfort' (2003, p.175)—an approach to research that does not seek a linear trajectory towards 'a comfortable, transcendent end-point' (Pillow, 2003, p.193) but that recognises and holds the unease, the

impossibilities, and the complicities inherent in all kinds of participatory research processes. ^[1]

2. Those with an interest in reading more about collaborative songwriting as research with people affected by the criminal justice system are invited to explore the work of Vox Liminis (voxliminis.co.uk), and to find out more about the Distant Voices project through recent articles by Urie et al (2019) and Crockett Thomas et al (2020).^[1]

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About the author

LUCY CATHCART FRÖDÉN is a researcher, linguist and community artist, working primarily in music and sound. Her PhD at the University of Glasgow, entitled 'Echolocations: exploring integration and the ethics of participation through collaborative songwriting', sought to better understand how shared creative practice might help foster solidarity and mutual care and how in-between spaces - between languages, cultures, disciplines or art practices - can become common ground. She worked on the Distant Voices: Coming Home research project, exploring questions of crime, punishment and reintegration through songwriting with people affected by the Scottish criminal justice system, and she devised and produced the project's podcast series 'The Art of Bridging'. She is currently undertaking a Scottish Justice Fellowship, developing new resources on how narratives are compressed and distorted by the criminal justice system. She recently moved to Malmö, Sweden, where she is in the early stages of developing new work on multilingual urban soundscapes.