

## Poetry in Public Places: Field Recordings

Graham Mort<sup>1</sup>

Readers and listeners  
    stories of a cosmopolitan  
illiteracy, sounds and  
    places behind period  
charm, poeticised  
    invisibly part of the city.

What are the main themes?  
    Visual images alternating past  
and present are generated  
    of their linguistic choice in  
the aftermath of the intense  
    metaphor of urban life.

Actions in the world, the  
    most numerous, most vocal  
rendered absent in its capital.

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**Graham Mort** is Professor of Creative Writing and Transcultural Literature at Lancaster University, where he co-directs the Centre for Transcultural Writing and Research: <<http://www.transculturalwriting.com>> His latest book of poems *Cusp* was published by Seren in 2011. His collaborative and multilingual public art installation and performance work include the Preston Peace Garden; The Pavement Project, Bradford; Brockholes National Park Centre; Sing Like a River, Beyond Borders Festival, Kampala; and work with the Gaelic language theatre company, Fir Clish, Lewis. He is currently working on an oral history project with older women in Kurdistan who lived through the terror and displacement of the Al-Anfal campaign. His new book of short stories, *Terroir*, is published by Seren Books (2015).

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Editor's Note: go to [liminalities.net/11-3/fieldrecordings.mp3](http://liminalities.net/11-3/fieldrecordings.mp3) to listen to the companion audio track for this poem.

Sedition rendered absent  
    previously excluded  
ambiguity, resistance.

We are constantly reminded  
    memory and resistance, the  
opening up of postcolonial  
    ambiguity of syntax, aspects  
of her absences and emergences  
    haunted by the potency, the  
tortured protagonist, other worlds.

The narrative guides us through  
    beyond the physical island.

What stimulated this initiative?  
    Subtle political engagements  
When Europe discovers you  
    and I are here, drumming in  
a pedestrian alley, already  
    and invisibly part of the city.

Obsession with the figure  
    constitutes the core of the  
city's alternative past and  
    present, the tortured protagonist  
rhythmically opened by poetry.

Capture the sonic improbable  
    trend that far exceeds this  
gesture, dissonant, connecting  
    a blind singer, a preacher, heels  
to office workers, a *chinchinero*  
    synonymous with sedition.

The end of the tether of the  
    political implications of a  
blind singer, implications of  
    their implications of this  
gesture as the crossing  
    of languages.

Contrasting realities  
    legitimate and illegitimate  
deeply intertwined with the  
    world, the liminality of the border.

Music's distress, collective  
    and egalitarian, the dark  
hidden underbelly in mini  
    skirts and heels, mini skirts  
and heels drumming in a  
    pedestrian alley during various  
journeys already choosing  
    a language.

Examine the interaction of  
    body synonymous with sedition  
the waitress serving high-  
    lighting the role of the body  
a public demonstration  
    an enthusiastic evangelist  
beyond legitimate nationality  
    deeply intertwined on the border.

Paper explores, aims to  
    rethink the crossing of  
languages. Do not subsume  
    this improbable trend, organised  
crime, secret resistance which  
    informed not only linguistic choice  
absences and emergences and  
    secret poetic calls for equality.

Multilingual poetics present  
    the body as a discrete entity  
beyond the legitimate political  
    implications of this gesture  
these poetic offences.

Buildings and monuments  
    a place of shelter in times  
of war, skeletal structure  
    a place of shelter, the space

of the poem, a discrete entity  
    haunted by potency used to  
mediate the relationship which has  
    changed phenomenology, rendered  
absent orderly configurations.

Monolithic multilingual poetics.  
    What was its purpose? International  
visibility connecting us to other  
    worlds that are always ready.

The dark hidden underbelly  
    traditionally served as a  
metonym, oppression, the  
    question of cultural identity  
beyond the physical island of  
    space, their language position.

Capture the sonic point  
    of departure, the world  
generated, a poetic in its  
    own right, a space between  
the dominant, set against  
    the changes, poetic offences  
not stopped short, drumming  
    in a pedestrian alley.

The dynamic relationship  
    between one-man band  
voices which are audible  
    questions of the lyric subject  
or narrative position.

Instead of choosing a  
    language haunted by the  
potency, situated on the  
    border, transpired in the  
stylistic connotations of film  
    noire, buildings and monuments  
have their own stories  
    constructive egalitarian  
interactions in what is emergent

space and language, the  
nature of public space.

The voices that interweave  
sonically negotiating the  
route, half a dozen situated  
on the border beyond the  
physical island of space.

A walk through what  
follows, understanding  
how the poetry signified a  
departure, a space between  
dominant trends committed  
to discover and articulate  
poetic calls for equality.

The psycho-geography of the city  
novel forms of a discrete entity  
most politically involved  
audible in public space  
coffee shops with waitresses  
serving in mini skirts, stylistic  
enunciation in its own right.



**Notes on the Creation of Fieldwork**

In my career as a freelance writer before entering academia, I worked on a range of mono- and multi-lingual poetry performance pieces and public installation commissions. These included work with Asian writers in Bradford and Preston, children in the Lake District, African writers from seventeen countries who had gathered in Kampala for a conference, and Gaelic speakers on the Isle of Lewis. Why then, did I experience a tremor of disquiet at participating in the Poetry in Public Places workshop?

My contribution to the Poetry in Public Places event was always intended to be a poetically creative one, based upon my experience of making public installations through collaborative methods, whilst also being mindful of the historical tensions between creative and critical research paradigms in the academy. The contingencies of the day made a long collaborative workshop with its participants impossible, so I hijacked that collaboration by using the already extant conference abstracts as my poetic 'raw material'.

My intention was to take a critically discursive vocabulary and to reconstitute it into a playful poetic form that was centred upon musicality, chance encounters, implied metaphors, and spaces – the synapses that might flare in the reader's mind to connect apparently unrelated elements. Presented after the experience of the day – the formal and coherent presentation of papers – the poem would act as a kind of collective sub-consciousness rich in echoes of their melding, of the mind's encounter not only with ideas, but the poetic potential of the language that carried them forward to utterance.

For a creative practitioner to encounter such a densely theorised discourse is a process of inevitable attraction and repulsion: it resembles hearing a language in which many words are meaningful, but realigned in a way that slips in and out of focus, as if heard through distance, sleep or fever. Yet all practitioners – internally at least – theorise their practice, have their own personal system of poetics, without which no new work is possible.

I wanted to contribute something to the workshop from the somewhat apprehensive perspective of my own creative practice. My 'ice-breaker' exercise (breaking down and re-forming poetic phrases in a seemingly random way that generated chance meanings) was intended to help bond the group. Human collaboration is itself a kind of self-sufficient meaning. Here it was meant to lead towards a sense of the reader's or audience's role in realisation of the poetic text: a form of words that aims to resist entropy, that by its very enunciation challenges the silence that threatens to sweep away the unarticulated present and history of most people.

First, I experimented with the conference abstracts to see if they would 'go' or offer a route, as rock climbers say. That looked possible. Then, because I wanted this to be shared enterprise and it seemed appropriate to the themes of

communality and shared space embedded in the workshop, I asked poets Janet Lees and Lizette Martinez to join me to develop a working method evolved from earlier projects. First, we all read the conference abstracts and selected the phrases that resonated most using marker pens. Those choices were guided by chance, by musicality and by a localised potency of meaning. The key phrases were then abstracted from the abstracts, written on slips of paper that we then joined together verbally, improvising a 'found' poem.

In that improvised version existed the potential for many versions – just by shuffling the paper we have an infinite number of verbal juxtapositions and variations. So the poem at this point existed as a thundercloud of charged particles that could be discharged in any order; or as recombinant code, verbal DNA that could interact in many different configurations as phrases were liberated from their intended discourse into a new and multivalent one with many sites of attachment.

We let the poem lie for a week then met again. This time I introduced a limiting factor: we pasted the strips onto sheets of A4 paper, never exceeding one sheet, to create stanzas, narrative units, sound-bites, units of human breath that had a kind of improvised integrity. Our dozens of strips were consolidated into around fifty pages – on the understanding that they could be cut up again into new divisions when this phase was through. The pages were assembled in no particular order and we made a sound recording of the poem. Of course, we had often been drawn to the same phrases in the abstracts, and this began to introduce refrains and repetitions into the poem, giving it a kind of internal resonance, as if the poem were talking to itself or trying to remember its own vocabulary. A poem, then, with sections of text that could be read in any order, dispersed into physical, visual or auditory space and met by the reader through some effort of encounter.

Driven by the limitations of the workshop and the pressure on time, I decided to capture a version of our unstable and provisional poem. I began to transcribe it, giving it a more fluid form and enjambment. I set out to edit out the chance configurations that seemed recalcitrant, so obdurate that they lay beyond all possible meaning. I was continually drawn back to the poem, but in the end, I made very few interventions. However much I tried to resist them, sections of the poem took on meaning as I adjusted my reading: my appreciation of sense, cadence, syntax, and my own mind-set or angle of approach. I was tempted towards punctuation, then away, then back again as the language in the poem seemed to break and reform like mercury on the tongue.

The simple title I gave the poem is derived from the abstracts again, but is deceptively plain. It suggests the making of a new work both 'on location' and within a field of knowledge; the calculated act of transcription and the random gathering of ambient sound, thus oscillating again between concrete and abstract, deliberate and improvised enunciations.

All works of literature teach us how to read them through encounter and this was no exception: the poem slipping elusively close to sense whilst avoiding it, setting up a dialogue between the act of interpretation and a kind of internal resistance, insisting on *meanings* not meaning. These aspects of the unfurling poem also seemed to be expressed in the themes and motifs present in the mother lode – the original abstracts. If there is confusion and occlusion here, there is also richness and abundance, promiscuity and possibility, music and an elusive beauty of language that compels attention then squanders it only to draw it back again. The poem reads like a translation from another language into English and is perhaps both a reading and a translation of the original abstracts.

If my intentions were to approach the poem with a light touch, the linguistic content has darkened it with its own intent; if I set out with a mischievous project in mind, then that has been overturned by moments of serious engagement created by chance linguistic juxtapositions; if the abstracts formed a conscious deliberation, then this poem is their subconscious Other. And this is only one of the almost infinite permutations of form, which in turn lead to many possible ways of creating polyphonic, polyrhythmic, polysemic performance and installation work in public places. This precipitation of fieldwork into poetry and poetry into fieldwork offers a glimpse of that process.

### **Notes on the Sound Recording**

As well as presenting a stabilised printed version of our ‘found’ poem, I wanted to indicate ways in which it might be developed as a public art installation – in this case a sound installation. In seeking to create a version of the poem that might be ‘broadcast’ rather than read at the workshop, I returned to the original sound recording I made with Lizette and Janet (not quite the same as the text presented here).

I was more concerned with demonstration or process – a ‘rough cut’ – rather than anything that could be regarded as refined or finished, so again the emphasis is on conceptual work-in-progress. The recording has an added layer of human ‘error’: ambient noise, clicks, intakes of breath, pages turning and at least one error in the reading. Rather than attempt a more refined version, I cut three copies of the same recording together and positioned them above each other to create a layered polyphonic and contrapuntal effect when played back.

There were unexpected benefits to this process that lay in the technology itself – especially variations in volume and a degree of cancellation as the voices seem to interrupt each other or vie for attention. The recording I’m presenting here is the third version – I’d learned enough to gain some control, but not enough to attempt a deliberate manipulation of the piece, which has gained a new complexity.

The effect is a little like having three de-synchronised recordings playing



from open windows in a town square where the air's turbulence – the medium of all sound – is creating dips in amplitude to make eddies in the poem's currents of meaning. We pay the words attention both consciously and subliminally as they jostle, repeat, clarify and collide, establish then lose presence. Again, the poem seems to exist and resist existence, dissipating then falling into stillness as the voices fade. I was tempted to create a continual loop of sound, but decided to let silence have the last – unspoken – word.



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