

**Responding to Brexit through a Song: “This Country”, Professional Sport,  
Seamless Borders and Working in Europe**

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Responding to Brexit through a song: “This Country”, Professional Sport, Seamless Borders and Working in Europe

I woke in the night and looked at my phone. All was well: the figures for the vote to remain were good, nothing to fear. I went back to sleep.

As usual when we are away on writing retreats, David (Carless) and I took early morning tea (for him) and coffee (for me) and our conversation was inspired by Rumi and Mary Oliver, rather than Brexit. We discussed the beautiful sunny weather and how we would film a colleague later in the week whilst interviewing him about his research.

Eventually, I trotted off for a morning run while David balanced his body and mind in an hour of yoga. There seems to be something grounding in this movement for him - I can see that - a practice being passed down across centuries, from one generation to the next, from the east to the west, and long before science could tell us that yoga ‘actually’ ‘works’. Then we sat on the deck, breakfasting to the sound of the ocean and feeling the sun’s warmth kissing our bodies and skin. And that was when Roger came trundling past with his wheelbarrow of recyclables. He looked over and shook his head. ‘It’s tragic’ he said, ‘and you know what? We’ve had more subsidies down here in Cornwall than anyone. What were they thinking, having a referendum?’

It wasn’t a slow dawning: ours was a sudden reaction of horror and disbelief. We spent the rest of that morning reflecting, going over and over the same questions, *why? how could this happen?* Texting anyone we knew as if doing so might bring some relief and hoping the incoming texts from friends might help us find some seed of hope, some reason for what was, to us, our country’s insanity. ‘Self-harming’ said

one, text, 'what is going on?' said another. We didn't know, we had few answers, just questions and a feeling of impending loss. I wondered what my dad, who had come on the boat from Ireland with his parents as immigrants, would make of it, had he been alive now.

### Seamless borders

I have worked and travelled across Europe since I was in my early twenties. In the 1980s, my family built a home in the Algarve in Portugal and it was there each winter that I went to practise my golf for two or three months. I was a lone English girl when I first started playing in the Portuguese Amateur championships in 1981, at a time when 'England' would only send their national team to two or three so-called 'prestigious' events. The organisers were so grateful that a golfer from England was supporting their event, and when I won the tournament the next year, they responded beautifully, as if a daughter, as opposed to a foreigner, had won. By the 1990s, I was playing professional golf on the Ladies European Tour. One week I would be in France, the next in Holland, then it would be off to Belgium, then back to the UK for a few events before heading off to Sweden, Denmark or Portugal. Most times I would travel by car. I liked the freedom this gave me to potter, explore or just to stop. Most times I'd take the ferry from Dover and travel through different landscapes, sometimes as far as the Algarve or Italy, through the Alps, from one country to the next, meandering between countries where borders appeared seamless.

One tradition in golf (and many other sports I suspect) is to offer hospitality to visitors playing in the competition. So, I would sometimes accept hospitality offered by families who were members of the clubs hosting our tournaments and was

welcomed into their homes, staying for the duration of the tournament. In Denmark, Sweden, Portugal, Guernsey, France, Holland and many other countries, families gave me an opportunity to see a different side of their country - one that is normally off limits to tourists and visitors. While the borders between countries may have been invisible, people's body shapes and sizes; hair and skin colour; food, wine and beer preferences; their fashion, cultural music, climate and language were different and I loved learning about how things worked 'round here' in each new place. Sometimes the differences were obvious and stark; at other times only subtly so, yet what I experienced everywhere was goodwill towards me, a stranger and traveller, just trying to earn a living.

After I stopped playing the tour, I didn't lose my thirst for and enjoyment of exploring and working in Europe. I worked for the TV network *Eurosport* in Paris for several years presenting a weekly programme and for the past decade, along with frequent trips along the west coast of France to surf or stay with my cousin, I've been teaching for a friend and colleague called Pedro Ferreira at the University of Coimbra in Portugal.

Coimbra has one of the oldest universities in the world, founded in 1290 and it is with Portugal that we English have our oldest treaty, the Windsor Treaty, signed in 1373. It reads,

[t]here shall be between the respective kings and their successors, their realms, lands, dominions, provinces, vassals, and subjects whomsoever, faithfully obeying, true, faithful, constant, mutual, and perpetual friendships [*Amicitiae*], unions [*Adunationes*], alliances [*Alligantiae*], and leagues of sincere affection [*purae Dilectionis foedera*]; and that, as true and faithful princes, they shall

henceforth reciprocally be friends to friends and enemies to enemies, and shall assist, maintain, and uphold each other mutually, by sea and by land, against all men that may live or die of whatever degree, station, rank, or condition they may be, and against their lands, realms, and dominions (cited in Stevens and Haynes, 1881, adapted Baldwin, 2009, p.226)

I feel leagues of sincere affection towards my friends who live in the different countries I describe above, and feel, in an embodied sense, that I am *European*. My feelings towards Portugal, and Pedro at the University of Coimbra, reflect this treaty: it is a true, faithful, constant, mutual, and perpetual friendship. Trowbridge (2016) writes that the Windsor Treaty contained clauses to encourage migration between the two countries along with rights to live and work there. Such communal access has been something many of us have enjoyed through being part of the EU and it is something many scholars on the European mainland appreciate, travelling to the UK to study and work.

Pedro graduated from the Department of Exercise Nutrition and Health Sciences at the University of Bristol in 2004 with a cohort (from a very small department) of seven doctoral students. However, he had joined the department mid-way through his doctoral studies after a series of unfortunate circumstances left him without a supervisor (his first supervisor died and then the replacement took a job in America). When Bristol-based academic, Ken Fox, a third supervisor, stepped in, we students welcomed Pedro into the small, tight-knit post-graduate group that we were. We took him to the local pubs, the local curry houses and into our homes. David (Carless) shared his songs as we all sat, sang and talked late into the night around kitchen tables in the accommodation of different students. When he travelled back

from his home in Coimbra, Pedro would often arrive in Bristol with a suitcase full of bacalhau, which he would cook in one of our kitchens, as did other students who brought delicacies from Brazil, Sweden, and Greece.

Some years later, when Pedro introduced a Masters in Physical Activity at Coimbra University, he asked David and I to teach the Mental Health in Psychiatric Populations module and then later to lead two intensive qualitative research modules: one for Masters students and the second for Doctoral students.

Sitting in Pedro's Kitchen last November, at the beginning of my eleventh year of teaching in Portugal, I asked Pedro, 'What were your first thoughts when you heard about the UK's decision to leave Europe?'

'Well, I was very disappointed.' he said sincerely, considering the question and responding in English. 'The plurality of UK and the diversity of people that work, study and live in UK', he paused, 'I think it is a huge step backwards.' Pedro went on to talk about his own personal hopes that his daughter would get the chance to live and study in the UK and at the University of Bristol. He shared a little about what the experience had meant to him personally. Then he turned to more global issues, 'And I'm also concerned about the future and with the relationship between countries inside the EU. The UK was a heavyweight inside the EU, rather like a big brother to us, and I am afraid that other countries, you know, like Holland, may decide to do the same.'

As I sat there allowing what Pedro was saying to sink in, I thought back to when I was at school. If I had a problem with another kid who threatened me or bullied me, my big sister was summoned. She would wade-in and 'sort out' whoever was causing the problem. Her actions gave me a confidence without which it was difficult to 'live freely' in the playground. I thought too about the big shopping mall

outside my home town, where before the major retailers - Marks and Spencer's and John Lewis - agreed to open stores, the developers couldn't get the go-ahead to start the project. That is, without these 'anchors' there was no development, no new shops, no renewal, no regeneration, and no creation of jobs.

'We looked up to you' Pedro motioned, 'you gave us roots to some kind of moral, ethical, relational orientation, caring for the little brother and sister, not looking at what is best for you, or only yours. The UK stood for what might be best for us, all of us, and for others, outside. We don't understand. Why?'

I couldn't answer Pedro because I didn't understand either. What I did understand was that I was being propelled into a future that was not my choice and I was not alone.

Later that day, the Prime Minister of Portugal along with the President of Portugal were visiting Coimbra. Making the most of an opportunity were large numbers of lorry drivers and heavy goods vehicles, angry about diesel tariffs, driving into town in a long convoy through the centre of Coimbra at very slow speeds, blaring their horns to draw attention to their protests. The problem for me was that the building in which the Prime minister and the President were speaking was right across the road from the building where I was (trying) to teach and the trucks were protesting right along the road between the two. The noise of the horns meant I couldn't be heard, the students couldn't concentrate and eventually we abandoned the room and lecture. A small number of us ended up in a café on the other side of campus with a wall between ourselves and the trucks, which provided some protection from the noise. It was here in this kind of unexpected moment, that I broached the same question I had put to Pedro, about the UK leaving the EU, to my five remaining

students. Given that English wasn't these students' first language, there seemed to be some hesitancy in responding, or perhaps they felt it impolite to be frank or rude to a lecturer if they shared what they thought and it was negative. So I asked them a second time and said they could respond in their mother tongue, and then I asked if I could record what they said and asked, so Pedro could later translate for me.

The first to respond was a young woman from the Czech Republic, who was studying in Portugal, 'I don't have much information' she said. 'I just listened and read about it, but it is quite strange as England is a powerful country, a strong big country with a lot of power in Europe, so from the history point of view, England was one of the first countries when the EU was born, one of the founders ...now one of these countries says "we want to go out"... it's a problem because, what will the other countries do? Because it is a country with a big power ...for me, I'm from a really small country, we want to be in the EU because it is, for us, safer'.

Several of the other students talked about their dislike of and disinterest in politics and I wondered why this has come to be? If I look around at academia, aren't politics implicated in nearly every decision we make? I wondered if politics and the potential power of students has been stealthily hidden in education settings to remove interest and create apathy?

One student summarises this lack of interest, saying;

'I just remember that everyone talked about it on the news, but now people do not talk about it so often anymore. But I think it will be a big problem for UK and for the EU.'

A young man gave another perspective. 'My main opinion' he said, 'is that many people went to England in the last few years and now, when England decided



for the Brexit, they didn't think about those people, and even if they are there for just one year, they are now part of England and they contribute to the growth of the country. Today, we don't live in a world where we can say "ah, this is Portugal and just the Portuguese have rights." No, we live in a multi-cultural world and we have to accept everyone and think about everyone.'

And this is where I sit. It doesn't seem that people in my country are thinking about everyone - 'we' seem to be self-obsessed. Thus, I am unable to give friends a sense-making rationale for why we are leaving. I had and still have no answer or words that would help my friends understand. And I also find it difficult to convey in words the mixture of sadness, disappointment, disillusion, anger and frustration I feel. This shouldn't surprise me, much of our lives and experiences lie outside of a cognitive, rational understanding. At play, beneath the surface, embodied within our lived experience lies our felt sense, intuition, somatic and pre-linguistic way of knowing that cannot be expressed through an argument, essay or thesis<sup>i</sup>. So, to the students, Pedro and many of my European friends in France, Sweden and Spain, when they ask what is happening to the UK, and why, my feelings are best shared through the song "This Country" (Douglas, 2016b). When I began to write the song it was a response to how I was feeling about immigration conflicts within the EU in early 2016 but it wasn't completed until later that year as a way to convey more fully my feelings towards the UK (my country) breaking away from our European family. The lyrics appear below.

### **This Country**

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It's my country, right or wrong  
Right now I feel as if I don't belong  
Coz there's no pride it left me long before your call  
Are you listening to any of us all?

The neurons of the brain collide against the soul  
A rotten apple never to be whole  
The selfish gene they tell us in our DNA  
My country full of people bent on making hay

Step out in the rain with me  
Naive to think men are born free  
The numbing pain inside my head  
Heart on fire and feet of lead

My history is written on your land  
Where kin before me took a bloody stand  
A border crossing where some men they drew a line  
Shame you didn't come here at some other time

Step out in the rain with me  
Naive to think we are born free  
The numbing pain inside my head  
Doesn't mean I'm really dead

I want to breathe I want to feel some cleaner air  
I want to run somewhere barefoot without a care  
But your vision, face entombed within my mind  
I cannot claim that I am really blind

Step out in the rain with me  
Make believe we are born free  
The numbing pain inside my head  
Heart on fire and feet of lead

I feel it necessary to add here, that it is impossible to convey in a manuscript, and via lyrics alone, what I believe is the full power of a song because *singing a song*, with musical accompaniment, rhythm and melody, and a voice, make it possible to communicate different emotional and spiritual truths to those that can be spoken or written (for further discussion of this issue see for example, Carless, 2017a, 2017b; Carless & Douglas, 2011, 2009; Douglas, 2016, 2012). Singing the song at the conclusion of my paper made it possible for me to connect emotionally with some of the truths I cannot communicate through other means. That is, these truths are lost or diminished when they are disconnected from what makes “a song” a song – its performance, either live or recorded, being given breath through the human voice.

Performing the above (the essay and song) at the conference provided a space to stand with others ‘as a collective’ in the most fullest way I know how. It also gave

us all an opportunity to be visible and make a public stand against Brexit; something I for one had not done prior to the conference, and wanted to do.

The comments shared between all presenters at the time, and in email exchanges in the days following the panel, showed we were each hugely moved by listening to each other's contributions, and we each seemed somewhat saddened that our performances and the panel were over so quickly. Although we have been given an additional opportunity to revisit and share our experiences in textual form through this special issue, the problem for me is here we privilege 'the text' and written word and removed from view is 'the body', 'voices' and the visual embodied images manifest when we presented and shared our work live at the conference.

Digital media and technologies, and particularly films and music documentaries, offer a route to reconnect and share a little of the physical landscape that framed our session. These mediums are also accessible across the world and therefore have the potential to reach outside of the academic environment and engage a more diverse audience than are likely to attend an academic conference. These mediums equally have the potential to be sensitive to an emotional non-verbal translation of meaning. And I am not alone in recognising this potential.

When I mentioned to David (Carless) that I intended to perform the song at the completion of my paper, his immediate response was 'you need to record it! And you need to put it on Youtube'. He then generously offered to record the song. This led to a very intense and focussed 48 hours in the recording studio (which is the time I had before leaving for the conference). Firstly we laid down a vocal and lead guitar, then went on to explore a variety of bass rhythms in order to create a harmonic foundation and pulse for the recorded version of the song. David experimented with

different riffs with his electric guitar to give additional texture, adding distortion and overdrive to increase tension and energy as the song progressed. We also added several multi-tracked backing vocals; all in the service of enhancing and amplifying the mood, message and spirit of the song and those truths that are translatable through music, rhythms and melody.

On the way to and returning from the conference, I mixed and edited a film using stock footage from various trips I have taken across Europe and the UK. These images add and make visible a physical landscape that was absent when I read the paper. Included are beaches in Brittany and Anglet (France), Estoril (Portugal) and Godrevy (UK), the mountains of the Alps that sit between Italy, Austria and Switzerland, the cityscape of my home town, Bristol, along with other cities (Liverpool and London) and Coimbra (Portugal). The film scans the moors of Dartmoor in Devon, the M1 motorway that links the north of England with London, the face of a bronze statue in the grounds of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and lighthouse on Portugal's fierce Atlantic coast. The film turns a lens on chickens in a coup, gaged and unable to fly alongside wildlife and especially birds that eat, nest and fly freely across borders – borders that have been arbitrarily drawn by men (often following battles). The lyrics 'My history is written on your land/Where kin before me took a bloody stand/A border crossing where some men they drew a line' reference (perhaps) the conflict of previous world wars and my awareness that it was only with a deep-rooted need for peace that the EU was born.

To return to my earlier story and its links with the song and music video. Each picture in the film introduces different images of the countries I have travelled through and (prior to Brexit) felt I held citizenship in. As a 'member' of an EU

country, my friends and I had rights to live, work, study and share. And we shared an identity that we were in this together, we even had passport that said so, that even though we have many differences we share common ground. It is the identity that I thought I had, of living in a country where the majority of the people care about the health, human rights, welfare and security of *others*, that has been fractured. How can we move forward with the many challenges that face our planet and human kind when we cannot make treatise last with our neighbours?

Sharing the song on Youtube widens the possibilities for sharing (in a modest and small way) and provides opportunities to stand with others. Others who may also be feeling that 'who we are' is in question, and who may also feel alienated, lonely, in shock, disillusioned and sad following the referendum.

The following comments written on the youtube give me heart that indeed, I am not alone, and the song is doing its work.

"Beautiful - it's so nice to hear someone articulating that feeling of disconnection and alienation that so many of us have been feeling since the referendum, no matter where we happen to have been born." (Kates Milnes)

"make believe we are born free, The numbing pain inside my head, Heart on fire and feet of lead"... captures the powerlessness we are feeling and the exhaustive efforts to try and fight against the everlasting tides of relentless battles' (Helen Owton)

'Encore un belle réussite vocale, instrumentale et cinématographique ! Un poème touchant pour évoquer un moment d'histoire bien décevant.' Roughly translated, *Another great vocal, instrumental and cinematic success! A poem*

*touching and evokes a moment of history that is very disappointing.* (Robert Richard).

Along with connecting and sharing with others, and making a visible stand, I also hope that the Youtube version provides an additional complex, emotional, and sincere translation regarding my feelings about Brexit and its consequences.

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i I am referring here to a number of scholars whose work has influenced my thinking about knowledge held within the body that can be difficult or impossible to communicate or translate into words. These include Judith Butler and her essay on the unsayable, (see Butler, J 1997, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, New York:Routledge). Also important to my thinking is John Dewey (1934) Dewey, J 1934, *Art as experience*, New York, Capricorn Books and Eugene Glendlin, (1992) writing about somatic pre-linguistic knowledge and felt sense in Gendlin, ET 1992, ‘The wider role of bodily sense in thought and language’, in M. Sheets-Johnstone (eds.), *Giving the body its due*. Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 192-207.