

**Making Jaguar Kin: Uncurling**  
**Transcript of a conversation between Oluwafemi Hughes Jonas and Josie Hall**  
**October 2021, ONCA**

**Josie Hall:** Hello! Thank you for clicking play and choosing to find out more about Uncurling by Jaguar Kin. This project was a collaborative piece of work between nine Brighton-based black and brown creatives, and two of us are here to tell you a little bit more about the process. But first let us introduce ourselves. Hi Femi.

**Oluwafemi Hughes Jonas:** Hi Josie. Well, my name is Oluwafemi or Femi for short. And I just need to say I'm so excited that my poem was made into a song by Josie. Thank you so much.

**JH:** You're welcome.

**OHJ:** I worked as a facilitator around social justice topics, supporting deeper dialogue. I am a writer of prose and a sometime performance poet. I grew up a working class gal in Scotland, of an African father and Indian mother and am very much shaped by experience of class and being only the black person with the loss of identity. But it was living in Brighton close to the South Downs that I started to discover my connection and my love for that wild space. And it just helped. It's helped me a lot. And it so happens that Josie and I met right here in ONCA Gallery. And I heard something else today - that the symbol is the puma, the jaguar.

**JH:** Ah, the symbol of the ONCA Gallery? I hadn't registered that either. Wow, some magic happening there.

**OHJ:** So Josie, would you like to introduce yourself?

**JH:** Sure. So yeah, my name is Josephine Hall, but you can call me Josie. I'm also a writer, with a background in visual art and music as well. But nowadays, I mainly write poems, stories, articles, and songs, and often collaborate with audio and visual artists as well. And I grew up down in the depths of rural West Cornwall with my sister, Jamaican father and English mother, and I also lived off grid for a year in West Scotland, so I feel a deep connection to coastal and wild landscapes. I've been based in Brighton for a while now. And I love having both the South Downs and the coast on my doorstep. And yeah, me and Femi, we first connected didn't we over our shared experiences of living in remote places, and being one of the very few brown faces. So yeah, let's get into it.

Femi, the words for Uncurling come directly from your poem 'Wind Wheels Turn', which was written as part of the 'Tenebrae: Lessons Learnt in Darkness' project for Brighton Festival, which we both were a part of. For people listening, this project invited us and thirteen other writers to reflect on darkness and light - particularly looking back over the events and revelations of 2020, and to create work around meditating on and moving beyond loss. We had quite a few people of African descent in our group, and several of us explored kind of similar themes around breath, ancestral trauma and exposed inequalities. But Femi, while many of us zoned in on one or two aspects, your poem managed to incorporate all of this, and so much more, with vivid imagery and drawing on several interdimensional inspirations. Can you share a little bit about the process of writing that poem?

**OHJ:** Thank you for those accolades. Yes, well, I had written some short poems in 2020, around lockdown. And I guess the Tenebrae project really focused my mind on the Wind Wheels Turn poem. It was a journey over quite some time. I remember sitting in my room with these themes whirling about in my head. I mean, lockdown had lifted the veil off our eyes, and we saw the poverty, hunger and inequality thrown into sharp focus. So I was brainstorming some of the themes, and I chose it, I broke it down using post it notes.

**JH:** Very handy writer tool.

**OHJ:** Yes, I broke it down to these three, four key themes. The focus on COVID, the NHS climate change, black people and POC people being the first to die and being killed. And in that the legacy of slavery came up really strongly for me. But the one common element that melded all of these things together was the fact that we as human beings, are literally forcing out our ability to breathe, including the breath of all species and the life of our planet home. And then when you sit down and think about it, it just, it's so overwhelming. And I think many of us, we kind of tune out a lot of the time in order to just to go on. But so it took a lot of going out, walking in nature, sitting on the hills in the South Downs really helps in that beauty, you know, and, you know, just sort of realizing the disconnect that there is from ourselves - from myself sometimes - and from nature, and the need to slow down and just remember our own breath. And, you know, have compassion for all that's happening. So, in this process, then many questions emerge, and the first one was about all the suffering. Who was it that's most at risk? Who is it that's dying? And we saw, of course, the most vulnerable, but older people, the poorest people, people of the global majority right across the globe, suffering the most from climate change. So, you know, there's all these feelings that I was kind of sitting with. It was a kind of despair and a sense of utter hopelessness when you start thinking about it. But, but it's like, when you sit with that despair - while I was sitting with that despair - it's like you get flipped into the opposite of, you know, as the Taoists say, everything contains its opposite. So it's kind of flipped into well, you know, where is the hope? You know, where do I look to? Where do we look to for the hope? And, and when you saw in the, during the pandemic, that people's compassion was aroused. You know, the food banks were overflowing, the support for the NHS, and so on. And for me, what was clear, the image that came flooding through my mind was the imagery of the film I'd seen of Harriet Tubman freeing - can you remember the name of it?

**JH:** I think it's just called Harriet.

**OHJ:** Harriet, yes. Freeing Africans from slavery. And such an energy of her running, this image of her running.

**JH:** And that had come out just before the first lockdown as well.

**OHJ:** Yes, that's right. That's right. So it's like, suddenly, I felt, just in this moment, I felt a little bit dizzy. Something about this running and you know, coming from the dark woods of despair into some kind of different energy. So this, it was a kind of social activist liberation type energy that was moving me at that moment. You saw in that film, that huge compassion, courage and determination that you see in younger and older people today around the world standing up for more awareness in action, you know, it's not just a knee jerk reaction, but awareness in that holistic awareness and action. So I did a lot of meandering, drawing this and that and digging deeper. And that's where the energy of the jaguar sprung to my mind. And I just picked up that energy. This was Harriet Tubman, like a black jaguar running, that line that keeps repeating in the poem. I saw a woman as a black jaguar running, and I picked up that energy and ran with it myself. And so that sort of supported that change in the poem, the tempo, that social activism is an engine for change and transformation. But then I thought, well, how do I, where do we look deeper for the wisdom that we need at this moment, and you know, the world is full of wisdom. And they had this line in my head which was a river, a river in the flow of her bones. And that was about following nature's wisdom and allowing nature to support us and show us the way. So that brought me to that question in the poem was: ask the honeybee the elm tree, the earth what they know. You know, there comes a time to galvanize, and that's now. So we as a people, individually and collectively can bring both the personal, the socio political, nature and the spirit together in dialogue to make more affirming change possible. So I think, in a nutshell, that's my process.

**JH:** Wow. Thank you for sharing that. I yeah, definitely came across that whole interweaving of different issues and the need for holistic change. And the energy of the, of Harriet, and the jaguar running, like your writing's so rhythmic that it calls to be made into song.

**OHJ:** Okay. So Josie can I ask you what motivated you to make Wind Wheels poem into the song? I hear what you're saying, that it was the rhythm and so on. I'd like to know more about the process of reshaping the words, what did that look like?

**JH:** Yes, so I was just really moved when I first heard you reading your poem to me on that sunny day in the park. And I could really feel and relate to the despair in your phrasing. And really appreciate the honesty that you approached it with, and the sense of surrender, but also a sense of oneness and unity, in the several questions that you asked throughout the poem. So some of the questions I particularly remember, some of which are in the song: Why so many dead? Why the sun beams? What story must be undone to outrun the distances? How in these shadows, can we continue to breathe? And yeah, I went on such a journey listening that first time. And the weaving together of so many different issues that had impacted my life and the world around me, not just for the previous 18 months, but for most of my life. And in that moment, I saw so many images and heard lots of sounds. And yeah, it almost feels like I didn't really make a choice to make it into a song - more like the poem asked me to and I obliged. And I'd already heard this piece of music that Cyan Sphinx, Riphco and Moemar had been working on with Jez Clavi. And they'd asked me already, if I'd work on it with them as a writer, but we hadn't really settled on the subject or anything yet. But Jez had been running up coming up with some melodies, and had been singing a repeated word in the chorus section, which was "running, running, running." So when I heard your poem, and that repeated line, I saw a woman as a black jaguar run, I did think, hmm, maybe this could work, maybe these two these things are gonna come together. And I think I asked you right then, can I make your poem into a song? And you were up for it.

**OJH:** I was like, yeah, please!

**JH:** Brilliant, she's on board. So yeah, then there was a few weeks or so of spending lots of time listening to the music with your poem in front of me. So I sat with it, I walked with it, I took it to the downs, took it to the beach, went through saying, or singing some lines along, crossing out and highlighting as I went. Lots of squiggly arrows, etc. And some post-it notes for sure. After several attempts doing this, I then moved to my notebook and started rewriting some different ideas for verses. And I'd decided pretty early on that I wanted to begin and end with your voice speaking the original poem and have lots of repeated, have a few repeated lines, especially how in these shadows do we continue to breathe? I kind of knew that I wanted that to be in the chorus somehow. Because yeah, as you already kind of spoke about that issue of breath and the restrictions to our breath that come hand in hand, with oppression, ill health and pollution, felt really all encompassing, with all the other issues and themes that the song addresses.

**OHJ:** So important when you're talking about those things go hand in hand with ill health, and oppression and pollution. Yeah.

**JH:** Yeah. And the breath is like, also our anchor to like, surviving those things and coming out. And your poem was quite, it's quite long. Yeah. So I knew I'd have to make some tough choices with which parts to include. And in the process of actually thinking about this, this interview, I was thinking there are so many beautiful lines, we can make a whole nother song from your poem. I mean a part two, a continuation. And yeah, there were lots of different sensitivities that needed to be balanced really carefully. So I guess that's why I zoned in on the feeling of journeying within your poem, which came with the rhythm in your writing, and structured the song lyrics and the journey as well. So beginning at loss and despair, moving through a searching process and then connecting with history, and with the natural world and unfurling into some kind of hope. And then there was the Amanda Gorman reference you made in the, towards the end of your poem. "A woman before millions stands / says lift our gaze to our purpose / Our spirit is far larger than any state force." Which fits perfectly in your global and all-encompassing poem. And as I was restructuring something about the previous two lines. "Today, on the streets / drum beats / pulse of feet / youth rising up fists full of fire". And these brought images to mind from the Black Lives Matter protests last summer in Brighton. Two poets and activists who I met around that time who have now become friends Aflo.the poet and Priss Nash, and their poem Wake Up. And as I was already thinking about the video, I guess, at this point, as well, so I decided to

change the reference for the song, reshaping and reference wake up. So after several weeks of all this experimenting, it was time to come together and share it with you and the other four musicians. So yeah, so we came, we came together with Riphco and Moemar, also known as Cyan Sphinx, who are the musicians and producers, and Jez Clavi the vocalist, and you all came around to mine and Riphco's house. How did you find that process?

**OHJ:** Oh I absolutely loved it. Suddenly, I was with these five cool dudes, and musicians and producers and sound engineers, or whatever. I mean, I'd never been in a situation like that, never seen how music was made. And what I really loved was the atmosphere that was created, I mean, it was food, you know, it's a black woman, people of colour thing, you know, making the food, sitting around eating and chatting, and, and then just this atmosphere really supported us to collaborate and cooperate really, really easily, you know, giving each other feedback, allowing each other to breathe. And so it was very democratic. You know, I just, I loved it, when somebody said, No, we're not going to change too much the original poem, we want to stick there as much as we can, you know, and I thought, oh, now that's, I was ready for it to be ripped apart. But I thought that was lovely, that sort of feeling about it. So yeah, I thought it was brilliant actually, I loved it.

**JH:** I think a lot of that feeling came from that whole holistic feel to the original poem, as well. And that everyone, very quickly felt like a connection with what you'd written and the themes were impacting them as well. So I think everyone was really enthusiastic and empowered by the process. So yeah, it was great.

**OHJ:** And then Josie, alongside creating this song, and working with the musicians, you were also going through the whole other process of creating a film and collaborating with other artists. Well, that's a lot. What was your process with that?

**JH:** Yeah, I guess, I guess I had begun thinking about the video that very first day that we met in the park, and you read me your poem. It kind of all came to me all at once with like song, visuals, everything. So I knew early on that I wanted there to be both a city and a more wild natural location. And of course, that there would be a woman as a black jaguar running, very important. And, yeah, I have a little bit of filmmaking experience, but it's all been quite DIY. And so I knew I needed to work with someone with more specialised skills to create what we, what I wanted to create, to honour the poem and so on. And so I did some researching, asking around and found Munya at Thirty10 Arts. Working with Munya was really great. I just learned so much from our very first meeting, I was like, Wow, there's so much to know about filmmaking. Yeah, learned loads. And he talked me through how to create a detailed creative brief for the film project, which, interestingly, in many ways, was really similar to the things we think about as writers all the time: what is the premise of the story? Who's the protagonist? What's the action that hooks the viewer in? So I was actually pleasantly surprised when I came to do that process. Kind of, yeah, you know, I kind of feel like I'm the one doing a bit here. And then when it came to the locations, I spoke with a few of the collaborators. And you in particular, you suggested that I visit Woods Mill Nature Reserve in Steyning where I'd never been there before. And it was just perfect for their jaguar shots. So that's where we filmed all the jaguar outfits scenes. It's so luscious and wild, there with all the different areas - the wooded bits and then the open meadows and the lake and yeah, great recommendation. And the other two places, the other locations were in town on Hove seafront. And then Portslade Beach, which is the quiet beach that I tend to just go to when I want to go somewhere where there's less people. And so I'd made a start making a storyboard. I'd done an early, like pencil sketch with stick men. But then when I decided on locations, I went back and updated that with actual photographs. And again, it was a bit like going back to edit a poem or an article. And on this, I also included notes for the star of the film, Lya, also known as Black Diamond Dance. And it also turned out Lya and Munya had worked together before, which meant everything flowed just really easily between us. Yeah, I had no idea when I contacted them both individually. So that was brilliant. And Lya has an amazing energy, really talented and expressive dancer, as you can see from the film. I'd seen her on Instagram and on Hove seafront all throughout lockdown. She's been dancing on Hove seafront and teaching people. So she was very, very present in lockdown. So yeah, I was really pleased when she got involved in the project. So I sent Lya some information documents, and we had a couple of meetings to chat about choreography and styling ideas. And we then went with Munya during filming, to get the looks

and the movements that we wanted to work with the music and story. And we crafted shots that made visual references to some of the people who inspired your poem, such as Harriet Tubman. The shot of Lya appearing around the tree is our version of one of the shots from the Harriet film promotion. And after Lya and I had finalised the plans for outfits and their choreography in each location, I realized that somewhat subconsciously, we'd created four outfits that represented the four elements as well. So in town, Lya wore orange and reds to represent the fists full of fire from your poem. On the seafront, a floaty top and feathered earrings symbolized wind and movement. On the beach, Lya sparkled like the sea to represent water and spaciousness. And at the nature reserve, she danced and crawled barefoot representing a healing connection to the earth.

**OHJ:** That was synchronicity.

**JH:** Yeah. You know, when you don't quite realise that you've been doing something in the background in your brain. 'Oh yeah! This is what I was thinking!' And then we got Caroline Baguma involved as well, who's a local artist, and she came and did the makeup. Her and Lya together did the makeup to get that jaguar look, which was amazing, because I was not skilled in that area. And the filming took one very full day and an extra afternoon at the beach. And it was mid July. It was beautiful weather on the filming day so we were really lucky. It was hard work as well. And it was really hot. We were out in the open field, Lya dancing in bright bright sunlight. So yeah, she had a tough day. But she was great. And yeah, by the end of the day, we were then chasing the sunlight and holding up the reflectors, to get it to go through the trees exactly where we needed; being bitten by bugs. Yeah, everything flowed really well. And everyone was so enthusiastic about it. And like I said before, we all felt that connection to the themes and the stories. So it just felt really important to us to be creating something that shared some of what the black community had been experiencing in the last 18 months or 400 years. So yeah, really empowering and refreshing to work with the team of all black people and people of colour. And it felt like a really respectful and supportive environment, both the songwriting and the filmmaking. So I'm sure many of us will be working together again in the future.

**OHJ:** Well, I just want to bow down to this amazing combination of things that you put together, you know, you think about doing the film and getting all the artists together and the locations and the themes. Oh, my word. Yeah, I'm really impressed by that. It's fantastic. Excellent job, Josie.

**JH:** Thank you. Well, I couldn't have done it without all of you. And definitely not without your original poem, it started it all off. So thank you, thank you for letting us make your song into a poem. And for having this chat with me today. It's been really good to talk through the process.

**OHJ:** Well, I've really enjoyed it. Thank you, to you and to ONCA for giving us a space.

**JH:** Yes. Thank you for having us.

**OHJ:** Yeah, here we are. We've sort of come back full circle here.

**JH:** And before we go I just want to say thank you to Arts Council England as well. This project was supported and made possible using public funding. Thank you.