

THE ENCOUNTER OF SOUTH AFRICAN AND GREEK ART AND DRAMA STUDENTS BEHIND COMMON IDEOLOGIES

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In line with the aims of the *Institution for Afro-Hellenic Studies* (IAHS), a relevant project was set in motion in 2017¹ through a collaboration between two departments of two universities of two continents, separated by 7.652 miles one from the other, namely the University of Pretoria, *UP*, and the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, *AUT*.

Motivated by the historic struggle for freedom from the Ottoman occupation (1453-1821), the Greek students had to rely on the ideology of their ancestors to create a free Greek nation built on their collective historic tradition and culture.

At the other end of the globe, an already established independent state, South Africa, had been governed by a minority of 4 million whites through a regime known as *Apartheid*. The institutionalised system of *Apartheid*, officially defined as “system of separate development”, in reality, proved an unjust system of racial discrimination and oppression². Applied in a country of 60 million population of various racial origin, it lasted from 1948 to 1994, with the establishment of the new South African Constitutional Chart.

In 1996, in the framework of the “new Era of Democracy”, under the new elected president, Nelson Mandela (1994- 1999) the Republic of South Africa’s Constitution was signed. The bill is considered as the most sophisticated, all-embracing human rights in the world, especially in terms of “equality”, “dignity” and “life”, meaning “the right to life”, “the right to be free from torture” and “the right to be free from slavery”³.

¹ See “Reports – Study Travel – Exhibition: Detailed Overview of Present Project on Afro-Byzantina on the Occasion of a Visit to Greece”, available at:
<https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/EJC-10a62b9c2d>

² FW de Klerk’s message from beyond the grave/news24video (accessed: 26-12-2021).

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapter_Two_of_the_Constitution_of_South_Africa (accessed: 26-12-2021).

In the context of celebrating 27 years freedom of the Apartheid regime, and the official socio-political aim to create an inclusive for all South Africans nation, called *Rainbow nation*, the South African students, drew inspiration from the contradiction between ideology, as prescribed by the Constitution, and reality as illustrated by the actions of the South African society.

Banners for Liberty: A Greek – South African Art and Drama Educational Project

Inspired by the 200th anniversary of Greece's revolution against Ottoman rule (1821-2021), and the 27th anniversary of the liberation of South Africa from the Apartheid regime (1994-2021), students from Thessaloniki in Greece and Pretoria in South Africa were asked to create their own "Banners for Liberty" using them as national, religious, social, and cultural symbols to express their own ideas for freedom, visually in an artistically creative way (Figure 1).

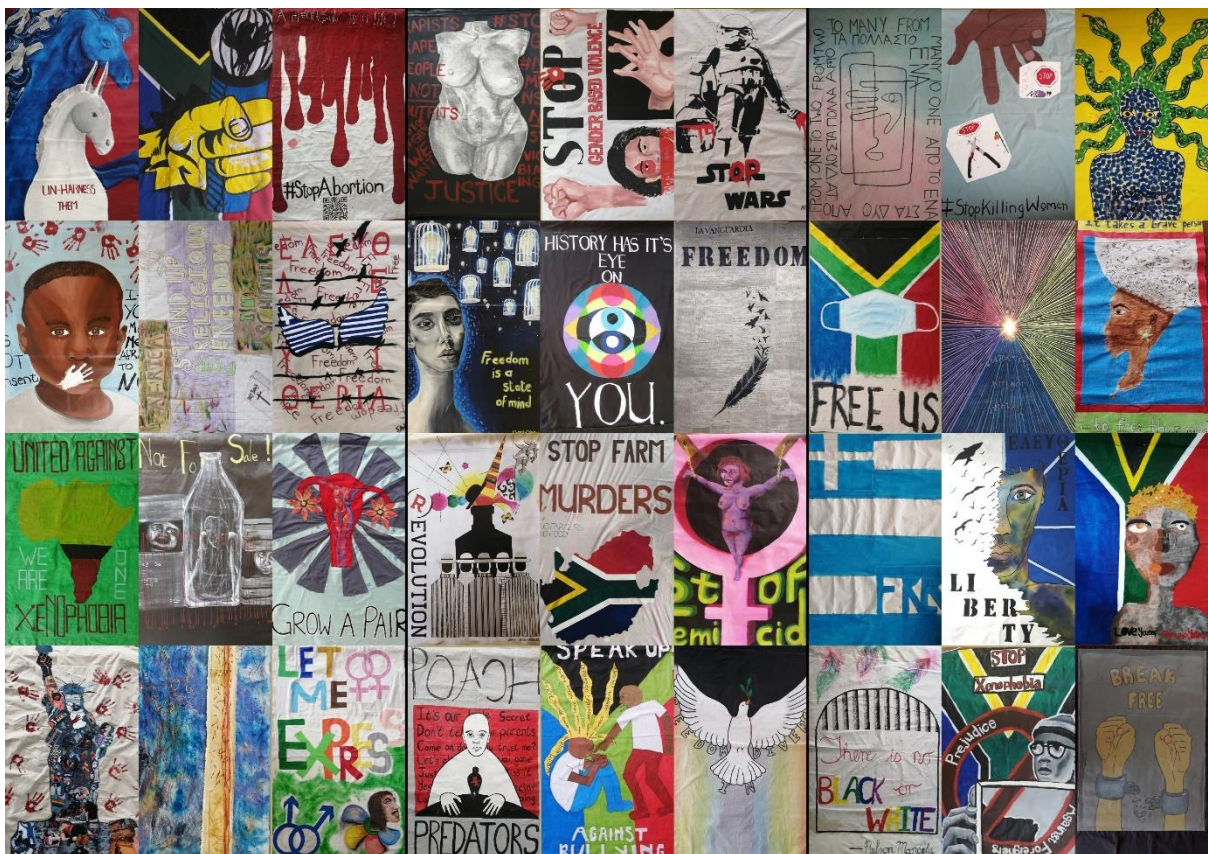


Figure 1: 'Banners for Liberty' artworks by students

Public appeal through Exhibitions

As a result, the opportunity given to these students to raise their own "banners for liberty", materialised in a breath-taking exhibition, entitled "Banners for Liberty", at the Pedagogical School of the Aristotle University Thessaloniki on 30 September 2021 (Figure 2), and shortly after in Bensousan Han (Figure 3) on 7 October 2021. In addition, it is planned for the works of art of all participating students to be brought to South Africa and be exhibited at the Javett Art Center in Pretoria in 2022.

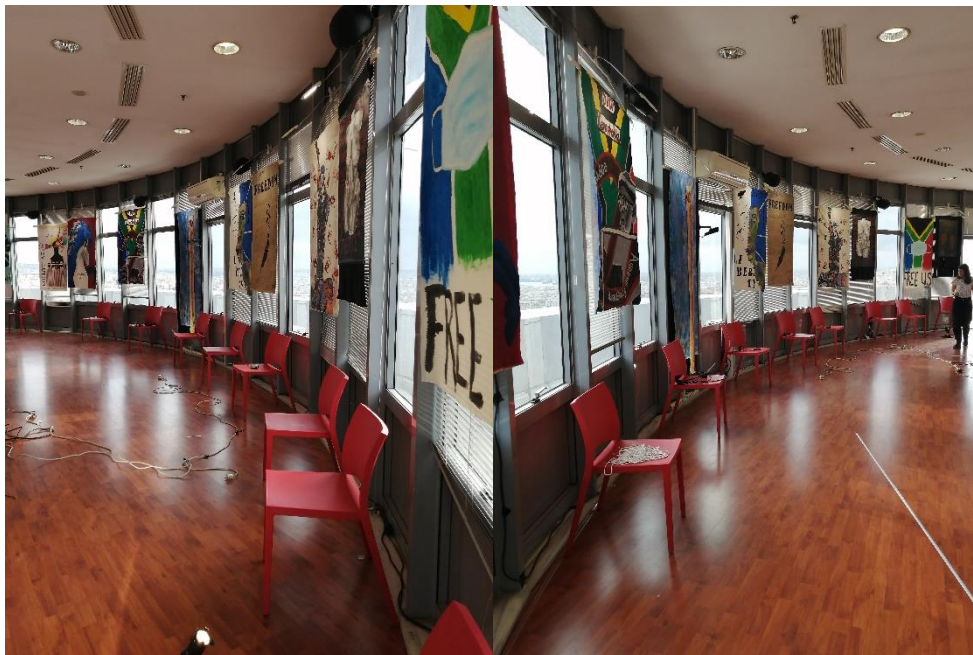


Figure 2: Exhibition at the Pedagogical School of the Aristotle University Thessaloniki.

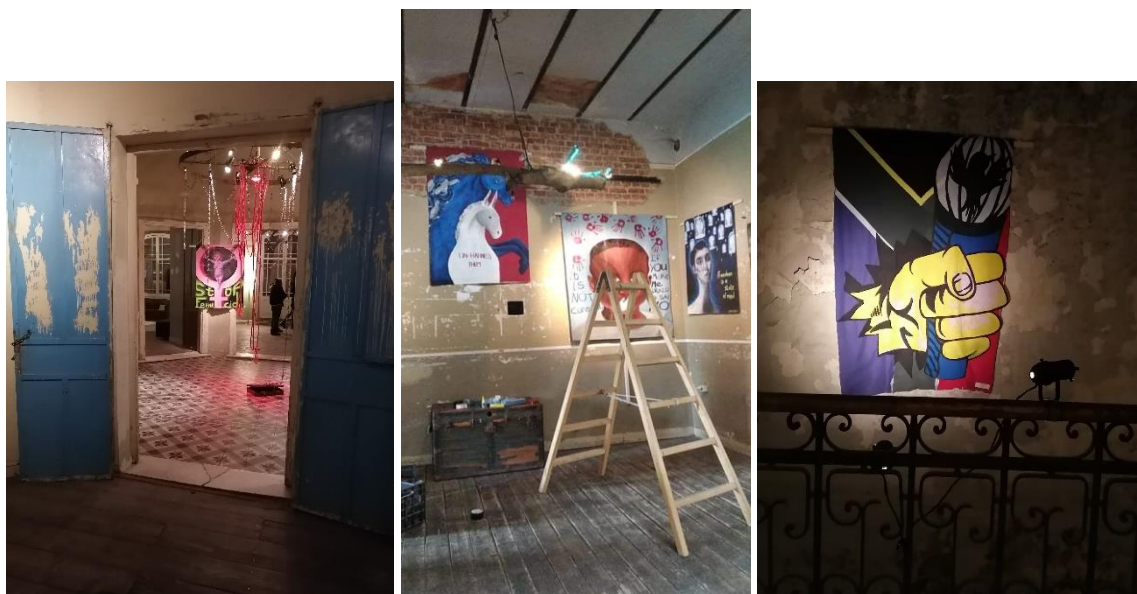


Figure 3: Exhibition at Bensousan Han.

Reporting on the event, journalist Violeta Fotiadis writes: "Freedom of expression, speech, and freedom from all forms of oppression, are some of the current ideas of young people who 'raise' their banners and give the visitor hope for a tomorrow for a world without racism, which does not justify, do or hide any form of violence".⁴

The project had initially started as an online collaboration between the Theatre Department of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) and the Department of Humanities Education (Art Education) of the University of Pretoria (UP). The artistic interaction between the students at the respective Universities began on the initiative of Mr Stergios Proios and Dr Raita Steyn (Figure 4), in March 2020, during the period of the Covid-19 lock-down and culminated in an extremely successful exhibition. Analytically, from a pedagogical point of view a common art theme, "Banners for Liberty" was planned, discussed, and implemented through the online video conference 'Zoom' in 2021.



Figure 4: Raita Steyn and Stergios Proios. Available at: <https://youtu.be/tgh7vfl2a3E>

During these online sessions, students from both sides reported on the realisation process of their projects and encouraged by their interactive communication, discussed their ideas, concerns and the progression of their works. On the completion of their creative endeavour, the South African students assessed the work of their Greek co-students and vice versa. The third part of the project is still in progress and will be completed in June 2022.

⁴ (<https://www.makthes.gr/an-ghinotan-aurio-epanastasi-ti-lavaro-tha-sikones-vinteo-fot-448358>).

In conclusion, the answers given by both, Greek and South African participating students, were positive and very encouraging. In complete unanimity, they considered the sessions as a very satisfying learning experience and a unique opportunity because they were able not only to share their ideas and collaborate with students from another country of different cultural traditions, but also to show and exhibit their own cultural and socio-historic experiences. Worthwhile noting are the following points:

- a. The common desire of the young generation for social justice, inclusion, and empathy: *The students of both departments, students expressed visually feelings of humanity.*
- b. The themes chosen by all participants are of universal interest: *Sentiments of provincialism and nationalism are losing their social impact as globalisation gains meaning as technology and social media broaden or break down communication barriers.*
- c. Art students are being trained to develop creative thinking, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills: *Creativity needs motivation, challenge, and freedom of expression.*



From the personal to the collective, from isolation to integration: an educational experience through the “Banners for Liberty”

Stergios Proios
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The initial inspiration for the project “Banners for Liberty” arose from the fact that 2021 marked 200 years of Greek independence from Ottoman rule and 27 years since the fall of Apartheid in South Africa. The question posed to the students of the respective departments was: “if they raised a banner for liberty today, what issue would they raise it for?”

The project occurred at a time when the Greek students were just coming out of the longest lock down, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the South African students had just entered their lock down restrictions.

How do we educate and create in isolation when education and art are social and collective interactive experiences?

The use of modern technologies available to us, has enabled us to cross the barriers of social isolation, i.e., to cross geographic as well as cultural boundaries and to begin a collective process of creativity and exchange of ideas and experiences.

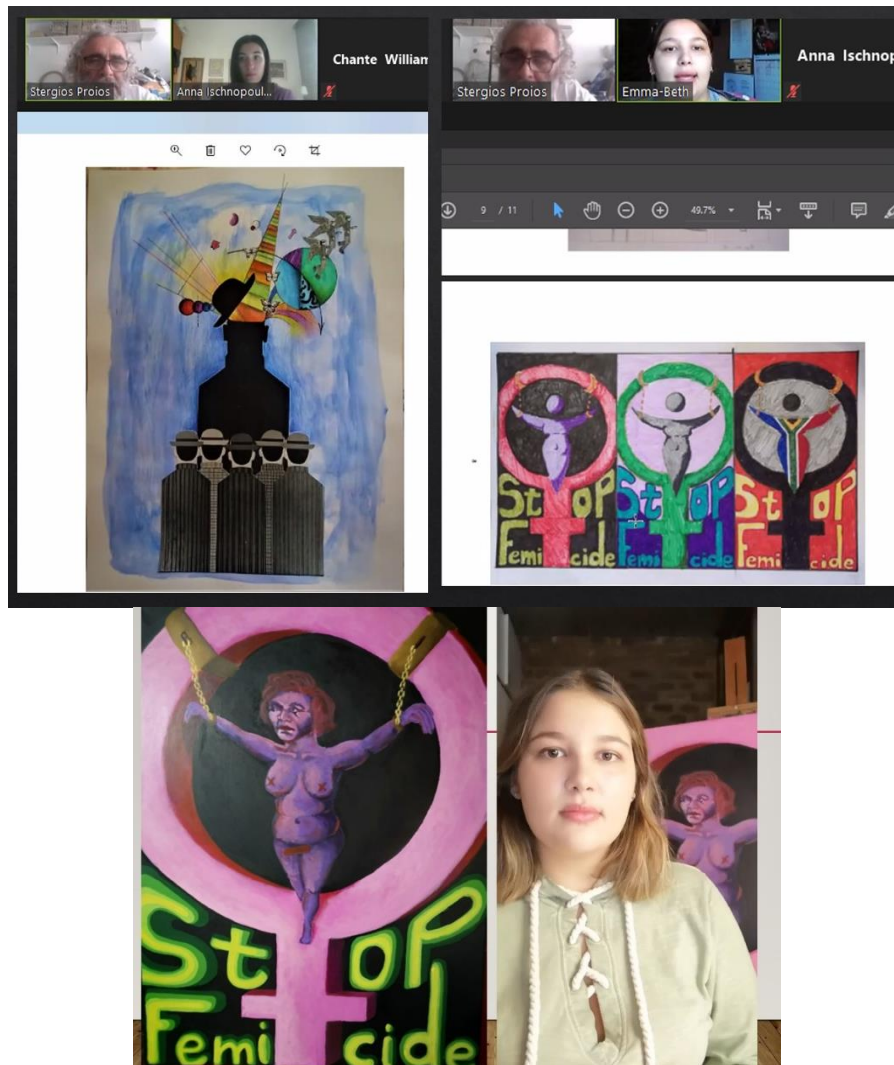


Figure 5: Online meetings between students from their respective Departments, discussing their ideas.

During the Zoom online meetings (Figure 5), as each one of us sat behind our individual screens in isolation, the need to express ourselves collectively, to communicate and to create art, was manifested in the positive exchange of ideas. The willingness of all students to search for common grounds became a desire to explore what liberty meant to all of them. To encourage each other and communicate through art was an inspiring experience for me as an educator. Having had that collective

exchange, the students went back to their individual spaces to ‘liberate’ their creative energies and produce their individual banner. That was the end of Phase One.

Moving to Phase Two of our shared Art project, our Greek students lived a new, out of the ordinary educational experience. The anticipation to see what the South African students had produced and how their banners would combine with the Greek students’ artworks was extremely high. Seeing the arrived banners from South Africa and placing each one next to the creations of our Greek students gave a whole new perspective to our project (Figure 6). The Greek students were able to see how their individual works now formed part of a collective whole. For me, I think, this was one of the most significant educational experiences, that the students experienced, in other words how the ‘individual’ became part of the ‘collective’.

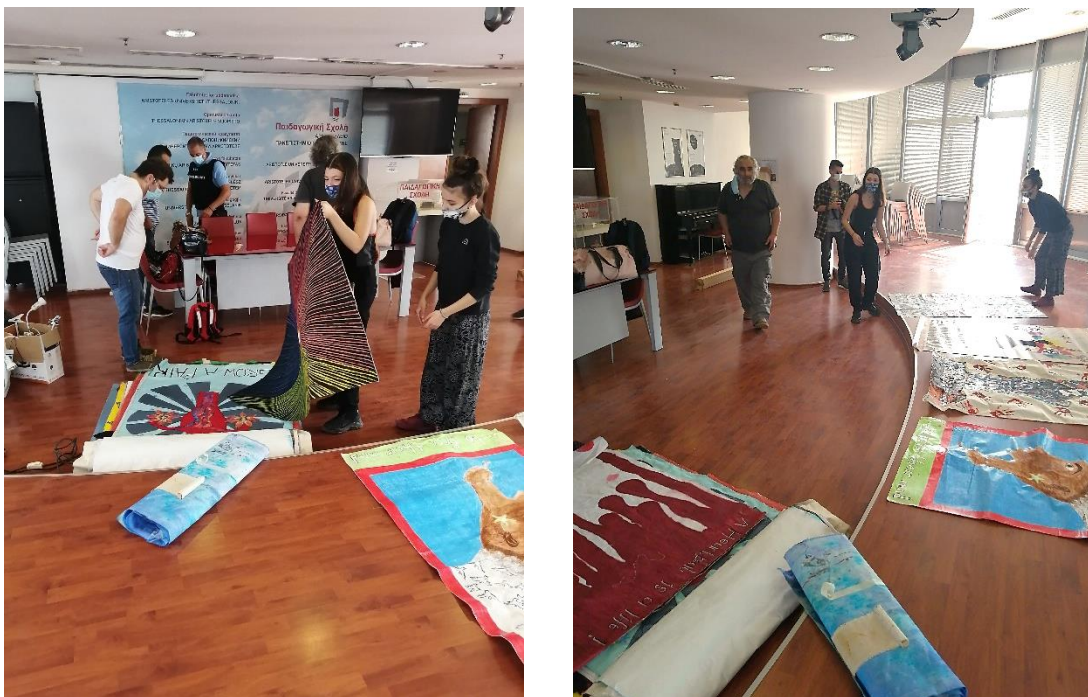


Figure 6: Students at work, preparing for the exhibition at the Pedagogical School, AUT.

This collective effort was further enhanced as we saw the exhibition space and started to place the individual banners there. The discussions of how each banner would be hung and positioned gave a whole new dimension, in terms of focus and value, firstly to the uniqueness of each individual work but also to how it integrated and communicated with the other works on display. This is common in the Theatre context

because it is a collective form of art where each individual component culminates in a performance produced by the combination of all components into a unified whole. Secondly, the Greek students had the opportunity to work behind the scenes as they had to organise and execute all the requirements for the exhibition and in addition to collaborate and communicate with each other and all those who helped to set up the exhibition, such as lighting, music, technical assistance, printing, and even the security and cleaning personnel of the space. Thirdly, being able to exhibit the works for a second time at another location and different space, they empirically realised how many possibilities their individual works offered to create a whole new perspective and how the space determines the way one views things.

Finally, I think, the most rewarding educational experiences the students obtained were, the positive reception that their works had both as individual creations and as part of a collective synthesis, and the publicity that the exhibition had gained and the feeling that we are not alone but part of a social unit.



Students' Responses to Zoom Encounter and Exhibition

Voices of the Greek Students:

**Stavrianna Dolme,
Alexandra Kakadiari,
Anna Ischnopoulou,
Despina Papadimitriou
Konstantina Tsolakidou.**

- It has been an amazing and unprecedented experience with many surprises. We all met new people and learnt from them. We communicated and exchanged ideas with the students from South Africa. It was something wonderful that we cannot find the right words to describe it. As for the cooperation, it was excellent, and we still adore the fact that no-one was judgemental about each other's ideas and final banners. We appreciated that everyone was trying their best for this great exhibition.

- We just want to share that everyone did excellent work, and we are grateful for everything. We would like to thank our teachers for the opportunity they offered us to express in our own way, both on a personal and collective level, what freedom means. We could do the same thing over and over again, because we really liked this unique experience.



Figure 7: Some of the banners created by the Greek students

Mentioned in Media (Chronological oOrder):

- <https://youtu.be/SHTaukfxQCA>
- <https://www.makthes.gr/an-ghinotan-aurio-epanastasi-ti-lavaro-tha-sikones-vinteo-fot-448358>
- <https://www.amna.gr/macedonia/article/591241/Labara-eleutherias-apo-foitites---foititries-se-Thessaloniki-kai-Pretoria>
- <https://youtu.be/i2xYE4vfjNE>
- Interview on Hellenic Radio SA, 23/10/2021: <https://anchor.fm/barbara-vamvakos/episodes/BANNERS-FOR-LIBERTY-e19n29f>
- Interview on Hellenic Radio SA, 13/11/2021: <https://anchor.fm/barbara-vamvakos/episodes/BANNERS-FOR-LIBERTY-e19n29f>

Darkness will not Prevail

Θένια Βερκούκη

Μια αιτία που θα με ωθούσε να σηκώσω ένα λάβαρο σήμερα είναι να υπερασπιστώ τα δικαιώματα μιας μερίδας της κοινωνίας μας που καταπιέζονται για τίς σεξουαλικές τους προτιμήσεις. Για αυτό, στο λάβαρο μου (Figure 8) επέλεξα να βάλω τα χρώματα του κινήματος “Pride” δηλαδή τα χρώματα του Ουράνιου Τόξου που είναι και τα χρώματα του πρίσματος. Όταν όλα αυτά τα χρώματα σμίξουν δημιουργούν το καθαρά φως. Το φως που διαλύει κάθε σκοτάδι εντός και εκτός μας. Έτσι, ξεπερνώντας τα όρια του κινήματος της “Pride”, “Darkness will not Prevail”, γεγονός που συμβολίζει κάθε αγώνα για την ελευθερία έκφρασης και των ατομικών επιλογών.



Figure 8: *Darkness will not Prevail* by Thenia Verukouki

Voices of the South African Students:

Khalipha Mbuthuma

The theme *Banners for Liberty* of our project inspired me to create one of my favourite pieces that illustrates what freedom is to me. Inspired, thus, by what females, mainly in South Africa, face day to day. My banner (Figure 9) is based on Gender Based Violence, Rape, Victim Blaming and Sexual harassment (even at home or at schools).

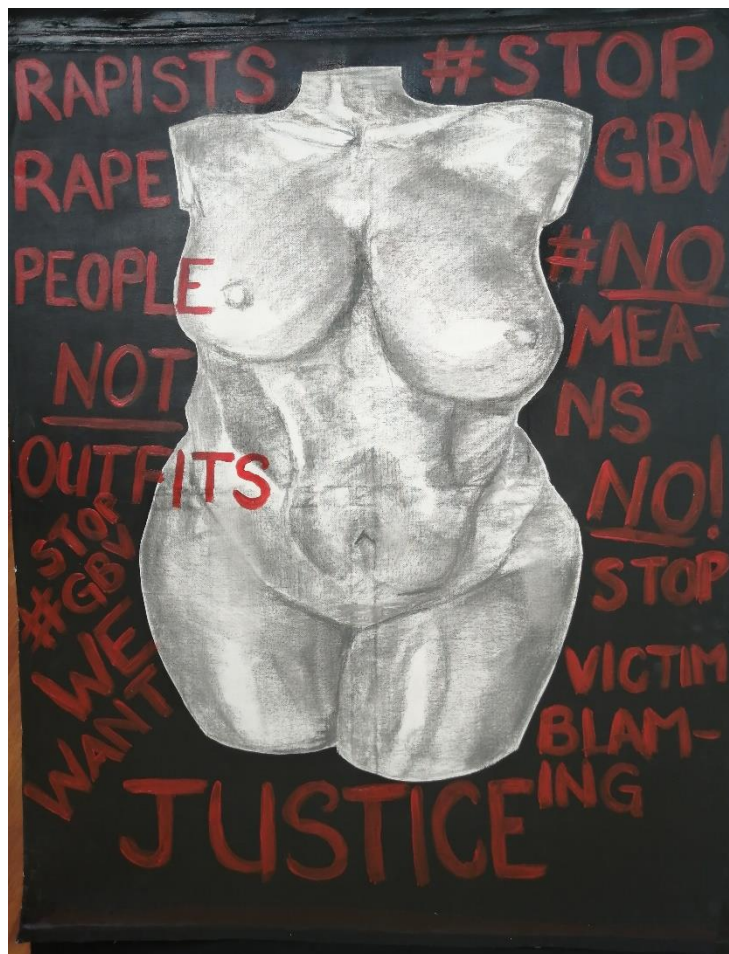


Figure 9: *Rapists Rape People Not Clothes* by Khalipha Mbuthuma

I mentioned in my radio interview (<https://anchor.fm/barbara-vamvakos/episodes/BANNERS-FOR-LIBERTY-e19n29f>) that “every girl knows a girl who has been raped”, and that the sad reality has become a norm in our country. My banner comes from my personal sexual assault experience as well as from shared stories of other girls and women. My banner symbolises the outcry of claiming back our proper status as women from all the trauma and pain our soul and bodies have been submitted to. My artwork, thus,

manifests the desire to be “free” from feeling unsafe, unheard, and blamed for being violated.

The female body is inspired by candles of female figures of different body types. I chose to draw a curvy female body, with uneven breasts and chubby belly because such a body type represents, I believe, the less appreciated nowadays in terms of an ideal female body. For a young girl, even as young as child, being of this body type still means stereotypical restrictions on certain types of clothing such as shorts, tight fitted dresses, or crop tops, to avoid attracting sexual predators and therefore prevent being blamed for causing assault. Under the heading, “RAPISTS RAPE PEOPLE NOT CLOTHES”, the nudity of the figure in my banner voices: “My Body My Business”,

Ansurie Barwise

Studying art online is no joke, but I feel extremely privileged to have the amazing art educators at the University of Pretoria who gave us unbelievable opportunities this year. Specifically, with the *Banners for Freedom* project, we had to choose a topic we feel passionate about regarding the overall theme 'freedom'. Our created banners would be sent to Greece, as part of 200 years celebration of their liberation from the Ottomans and ours 27 years liberation from the apartheid regime.

The topic of my banner is very personal to me, and unfortunately a demonstration of similar dramatic experiences a lot of men and women have had to deal with: sexual abuse. My banner (Figure 10) focuses specifically on child abuse, and how important it is to stop these predators from stealing young children's innocence and objectifying their bodies. I was sexually abused as a young girl, and it took years of healing before I had the courage to share my story. I soon learned that sexual abuse is shockingly a common occurrence. I wish to raise awareness with my banner, to encourage people to tell their stories and to be extra watchful with their children.

My banner is also a token of my healing and stands as a symbol that my story does not define me. The words spoken to me by my abusers are included in the background of my work. In the foreground a genderless figure hovers over the silhouette of a child. The words 'Poach Predators' acts as my slogan.

I hope to encourage people to have these discussions more openly, to remove the stigma of being someone's 'victim'. Our experiences are what makes us stronger, and through forgiveness and continual healing, we can change the world for the better and make the world a safer place.

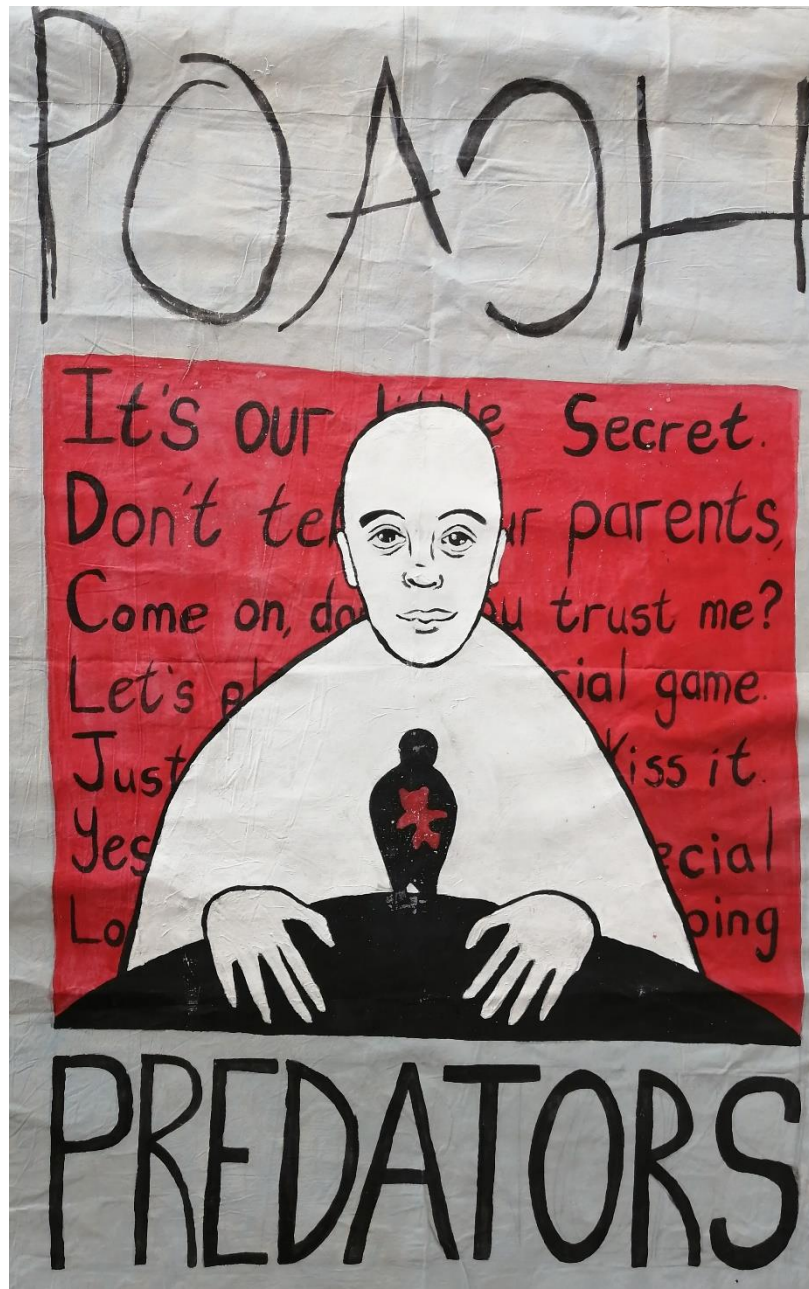


Figure 10: *Poach Predators* by Ansurie Barwise

Freedom from Xenophobia

Eunice Nel

South Africa is known as a very inclusive country. We were the first country to go under drastic political change without a civil war and ongoing fights. Yet even though we call ourselves the *rainbow nation* and even though we were one of the first countries to legalise gay marriage, we are continuously failing to accept foreigners into our country. Xenophobia is a globally known term, but here in South Africa it carries more weight in meaning. People from outside our borders are heavily discriminated against. They are murdered, tortured, turned away from job opportunities and live in daily fear because they are not South Africans. My banner (Figure 11) symbolises the persecution of these black human beings shunned from South Africa. The NO entry sign in the man's hand depicts a no entry to the southern part of Africa, South Africa. The background depicts the colours of the South African flag but inverted, pointing at the negative atmosphere behind him. The symbolic inversion of the flag translates as how South Africans are hypocrites, saying one thing to the world but doing the opposite within our borders. Xenophobia is defined by hate for foreigners, yet one cannot but wonder if these brothers and sisters of Africa are really foreign to us? We as a nation must hang banners like these high to fight the injustice caused by Xenophobia.



Figure 11: *Freedom from Xenophobia* by Eunice Nel