

Arts and Refugees: Multidisciplinary Perspectives (Vol. 2)

Marco Martiniello and Elsa Mescoli *

CEDEM—Centre for Ethnic and Migration Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Liège, Place des orateurs 3 (Quartier Agora), bât. 31, bte 24, 4000 Liège, Belgium; m.martiniello@uliege.be

* Correspondence: e.mescoli@uliege.be

1. Introduction

Published in 2019, the Special Issue entitled “Arts and Refugees: Multidisciplinary Perspectives” gathered together a set of articles exploring the role of art created and performed by refugees settled in urban European contexts. More particularly, the articles studied the ways in which artistic practices foster the multidimensional integration process of refugees in the contexts in which they live, and how they inform and support solidarity movements and claim-making processes. The Special Issue adopted a broad conception of refugees—including forced migrants with or without legal status, coming from different countries of origin, having gone through diverse migratory trajectories and life experiences. All shared the performance of art and gave it specific meanings in their new living contexts. Similarly, the notion of art was understood in a broad sense, including diverse cultural and artistic practices and domains, and not only institutionalised ones.

The aim of this second Special Issue on the same topic is twofold: on the one hand, the first objective is to deepen some specific crucial questions related to the artistic and cultural performances of refugees; on the other hand, it endeavours to expand the geographical scope of the analysis carried out in the first Special Issue. This second Special Issue adopts the same broad conception of both categories of refugees and of arts. It promotes interdisciplinarity as well as the study of empirical material gathered through mixed and innovative research methodologies—accounting for ethics and methodological issues concerning research with vulnerable populations (Harrell-Bond 1986). Furthermore, the articles show that the sharing of artistic practices between researchers and other research participants allows for a process of knowledge co-production or co-creation through a plurality of forms of communication, including non-verbal. It is also about taking part in a creative process, which combines the thoughts, approaches, experiences and narratives of others (May 2013; Pink 2009) and which favours the formation of a shared sense of belonging. This process also involves certain issues relating to participatory research methods, particularly concerning group dynamics and the roles of each person in a collaborative approach.

2. Arts and Migration

Researchers’ interest in issues linking arts and migration is recent but is growing rapidly. The starting point for studies exploring this link is that artistic practices, in all their forms and irrespective of whether they are professionally practiced or not, play an important role in the lives of individuals and are a means by which migrants act in different contexts and achieve certain goals.

The psychological approaches to the study of artistic practices involving migrant and refugee people emphasise the ‘therapeutic’ aspect of art to ‘heal’ traumas related to the migratory experience, particularly in relation to refugees (Dieterich-Hartwell and Koch 2017). The literature is therefore interested in studying the role of art in the management of psychosomatic disorders in refugees as well as in ensuring more psychosocial well-being in the process of settling and integrating into the new living context. Music and dance

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are particularly well known as vehicles for the expression of feelings of exile and longing among migrants and refugees.

The focus on the role of artistic practices in the integration process of migrants and refugees goes beyond the health aspects and integrates various dimensions. The integration process of migrants and refugees refers to the set of steps they take to participate in the socio-cultural, economic and political life of their new social context. These steps develop in interactions with specific policy measures, as well as with the actions and discourses of a plurality of services, institutions and associations, and members of the local population. Within this framework, the arts and creativity are conceived as tools that can be used by individuals living in exile situations of precariousness and marginalisation in order to “exist socially, to assert their presence, and even to claim rights and status” (Martiniello and Mescoli 2018). It is thus interesting to also analyse the role of the arts in refugee solidarity movements in European cities and beyond, as well as the trajectories of refugee artists and their strategies to claim a position in their new societies and in their art scenes (Martiniello 2019).

Indeed, migrants and refugees can speak out through their artistic practices. Through this, they materialise their presence in space and impose themselves on the listener through a multi-sensory experience. Art thus becomes “a powerful weapon for conscientisation, for strengthening self-esteem, for knowledge of society, for building social interactions and expressing demands, in short, for building a shared citizenship” (Martiniello and Mescoli 2018). For example, rap can allow the expression (through lyrics and rhythms) of feelings of exile, frustration and rejection of political domination, as well as the denunciation of injustices and abuses suffered by migrants and refugees themselves, but also by their family or their community. The artistic practices of migrant and refugee people can thus be alternative and creative political action strategies, developed by individuals often excluded from formal means of political participation, such as elections, and from almost all types of political decision-making processes (Salzbrunn 2014; Delhaye 2008).

It is also interesting to study the gender dynamics involved in refugees’ artistic experiences. These dynamics are of different types, involving different modes of participation according to gender, and different meanings and outcomes associated with these experiences. In particular, the intersectional perspective allows for a deeper study of gender dynamics, as well as the issue of racism, operating in the cultural and artistic field, focusing on how these dynamics are manifested, experienced and addressed by social actors.

The representation within artistic practices involving migrants and refugees (and the interpersonal relationships that derive from them) is linked to the existence of a tension between political and media discourses that exclude migrants and refugees through criminalisation, detention, deportation and border control, and discourses of human rights and citizenship, responsibilities and possibilities (O’Neill 2008). This tension is reflected in the fact that in the media, migrants and refugees are generally represented by other social actors, rather than having the opportunity to represent themselves. Research work based on the arts as a form of participation of migrant and refugee people counteracts this shortcoming (Damery and Mescoli 2019). Migrants’ and refugees’ artistic representations of their own experiences can be transformative in that they provide a channel for recognition and allow them to represent themselves. Spaces for participation and agency are created, giving voice to migrants and refugees and re-humanising them, thus countering of-ten essentialising and stereotypical images.

Furthermore, the scientific literature as well as various field experiences point to racial inequalities in cultural and artistic sectors, which operate in various ways and affect the artistic representation of racialised people. Migrant and refugee artistic practices can become effective means of combating racism in the arts and beyond, by challenging cultural hegemonies—that is, situated and standardised aesthetic norms and values that structure the production and consumption of the arts, and which are both the result and the indicator of power imbalances. The norms and values associated with minoritised populations are often excluded from the cultural hegemonies operating in given contexts,

resulting in structural barriers that prevent their meaningful participation in artistic and cultural life. It is therefore interesting to show whether and how refugees' artistic practices challenge the cultural hegemonies operating in the countries where they live, i.e., by proposing alternative aesthetic norms and values or by challenging the existing ones. This approach is even more important because the literature shows that the production (and negotiation) of borders, differences, hybridisations and belonging often involves cultural mechanisms, in which the mobilisation of (and thus access to) symbolic resources on the part of individuals impacts social relations.

In many countries, culture and arts are also the subject of public policies, to varying degrees according to the context and the priority given to them in each society. Specific policies may concern the participation of minoritised populations in the cultural and artistic sector, both as consumers and as producers. Attention to these policies also makes it possible to assess whether they effectively promote the participation of migrants and refugees, whether they respond to the needs and difficulties encountered, whether they trigger processes of inclusion or whether they maintain processes of exclusion.

Taking these theoretical elements into account, five areas can be considered which together constitute a general framework within which more empirical and theoretical research on the multiple relationships between arts and migration should be developed: local culture and artistic expressions; social relations and interactions; local cultural policies and integration policies; local political life; and local economy (Martiniello 2022). At the cultural and artistic level, it is important to examine how the artistic productions of refugees and exiled populations and members of ethnicised and racialised minorities are changing the local and even national art scenes. Exiled, ethnicised and racialised populations do not simply assimilate into the local arts. They transform the local artistic landscape and create new artistic languages. At a social level, the idea that artistic expressions can help to build bridges to facilitate encounters between populations of different ethnic origins and racial backgrounds sharing the same city or neighbourhood needs to be explored and contextualised. The arts can bring people together across ethnic, racial and socio-economic boundaries, but they can also divide them along these lines. In many cities, there is a tension between ethnic fragmentation and separation on the one hand, and inter-ethnic and intercultural mixing and dialogue on the other. This tension is reinforced or nuanced according to historical moments (of crisis, of solidarity) and contexts, stimulating or constraining relations and sociabilities between local populations and migrants and refugees. Another important question is the potential relevance of the arts in migratory and post-migratory cities for public policies. The first idea is to explore the issue of diverse representation in national, sub-national and local cultural policies: do official cultural institutions support migrant and exiled artists? Are local cultural policies becoming multicultural? How do immigrant and ethnic minority artists mobilise to change cultural policies? It also seems important to continue to examine the extent to which the arts are used in the context of local integration and social cohesion policies. At the political level, the arts can serve as a basis for the formation of collective identities, and they can play an important role in the social and political mobilisation of exiled, racialised or ethnicised populations. In particular, studies should consider how artistic expressions can be used to protest, resist and denounce the local social and political order. This is undertaken by analysing, for example, the speeches, sung words and various expressions made by migrant and refugee artists, including those that express protest, demands and the denunciation of injustices, norms and the established order. Finally, from an economic point of view, the question of the impact of artistic expressions of exiled populations and ethnicised minorities on the local economy needs to be addressed. The issues of ethnic tourism (Rath 2007) and arts festivals featuring diversity are important, as is the development of a local artistic life including people with a direct relationship to migration. Some cities effectively market their ethnic, artistic and cultural diversity as an asset to their economic development by attracting visitors and consumers from around the world. People from ethnically or racially minoritised populations can find in artistic activities opportunities

for cultural recognition, but also for economic integration and empowerment by seizing the opportunities offered by more diverse segments of the arts market.

3. Overview of the Articles

Within this overall theoretical framework, this Special Issue covers a set of crosscutting topics (and related research questions). It deals with the issue of arts and racism/anti-racism, contributing to the scholarly literature as well as to varied experiences from the field that point to racial inequalities in the cultural and artistic sectors, functioning in diverse ways and affecting the artistic representation of and by racialised migrant and refugee individuals. However, arts and cultural practices may also become a space for resistance to inequalities, challenging the system in place. The article by Rosaria Ruffini explores the importance of performance practices in the informal camps and shanty towns of southern Italy, where many sub-Saharan migrants live. Performance expressions in these camps take a variety of forms and are supported by local associations. The article looks at the critical issues raised by these artistic experiences, including the role of migrants, the dynamics of appropriation and action, and power relations with local associations, professional artists and political activists, also taking into account self-representation, artistic legitimacy and strategies of authorship. The article also analyses how performative practices are becoming an essential political tool in the fight against spatial segregation and racial discrimination.

This Special Issue also addresses possible ways of challenging cultural hegemonies, intended as a set of situated and standardised aesthetic norms and values structuring the production and consumption of arts, both resulting from and revealing power imbalances. Norms and values associated with minoritised populations are often excluded from the cultural hegemonies operating in given contexts, leading to structural barriers that prevent their meaningful participation in artistic and cultural life. Challenging these barriers and these norms contributes to the production of forms of belonging through the arts. Chrysi Kyratsou's article explores the dual role of music in expressing cultural differences induced by borders and in promoting other forms of belonging. Drawing on ethnographic research, including participant observation, documentary research and interviews, the author examines auto-ethnographic recordings involving interactions with refugee musicians. Through vignettes describing musical encounters between refugees and between refugees and the host society, the article examines how music serves as a mechanism for coping with estrangement and as a tool for articulating narratives of belonging. It focuses on how refugees defy stereotypes, seeking visibility and audibility. It argues that their narratives offer a perspective on reality that challenges linear constructions of nation-state borders and displacement-induced ruptures, highlighting the role of music's mobility and its intersections with human movement, informal networks and the cultural industry. Ana Mijić and Michael Parzer use fiction to examine the processes of refugee arrival in Austria. Drawing on the results of a participatory project, the authors explore how artistic practices in the fields of literature, music and photography can foster alternative viewpoints on the integration of refugees beyond assimilation. The analysis contributes to debates on how refugees' artistic practices can serve as tools for cultural and social transformation. The study involves the creation of artworks in a real laboratory and the acquisition of knowledge about how artistic practices reveal and challenge the common hegemonic expectations that shape the arrival processes of refugees and migrants.

Furthermore, in many countries, culture is an object of state or other government level policies targeting different aspects of the cultural and artistic life of its population, as well as different rules concerning the production of culture and arts. These policies vary depending on the context, and on the priority given to culture and arts in each society. Specific policies can address the participation of minoritised populations in the cultural and artistic sector, both as consumers and as producers of culture, by encouraging the participation of refugees to varying degrees and focusing on its outcomes. Elena Marchevska and Carolyn Defrin undertook a collaborative practice-as-research study

project involving ‘non-British’ citizens in the UK. Over three years, working alongside refugee and migrant artists in a non-hierarchical dynamic, the collaborative team produced four films exploring the concept of home in the context of government policy, social integration and intergenerational relations. The article focuses on two films created in collaboration with a participatory theatre company and a conceptual artist. Through an analysis of the use of comedy and visual representations, the article discusses how these artistic approaches resist simplistic views of migrant and refugee narratives. The authors also explore the creative and ethical processes involved in making films about artists’ work, highlighting how their aesthetics challenge prevailing migration norms and policies in the UK and Europe. The article by Jaka Repič examines the role of visual arts and literature within the Slovenian diasporic community in Argentina, established by post-Second World War refugees and at the beginning of the communist revolution in Yugoslavia. Drawing on ethnographic data and biographical interviews, the article explores how the cultural production of the diaspora, enriched by social memories and themes related to war, violence, post-war mass executions and exile, is influenced by three levels of cultural politics: the Argentinian framework of cultural pluralism that integrates migrant communities into the national identity; the diasporic level institutionalising themes crucial to diasporic ideologies, particularly those related to violence, exile and mass executions; and the transnational level, facilitating the integration of diasporic artists into Slovenian and international art scenes. The article highlights the often contradictory nature of these cultural policies, which require artists to integrate into both Argentinian and diasporic artistic fields, leading to partial social exclusivism.

Finally, the gender dynamics involved in refugees’ experiences with the arts are of different types, including distinct ways of participation depending on one’s gender, as well as different meanings and outcomes associated with these experiences. The intersectional lens allows the study of gender dynamics, as well as the issue of racism, to be expanded upon. In relation to arts and refugees’ issues, attention is drawn to the gender and intersectional dynamics that operate in the cultural and artistic field, focusing on how they are manifested, experienced, and addressed by social actors. Moreover, this Special Issue explores the extent to which a gender and intersectional approach to arts and refugees’ issues can bring about broader methodological changes to research in this field, as well as new policy challenges. The article by Stella Grace Conard and Elena Horton explores the experiences of women participating in a Danish arts-based integration project, in which migrant and Danish women engage in craft activities such as knitting, sewing and crochet. The study, based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, examines how factors such as gender, social class, ethnicity, family status, employment and the perception of craft as a hobby or a source of income influence the participants’ roles, self-perception and expectations within the project, highlighting the importance of social recognition in the integration process. Artistic practice enables women to respond to discourses on integration and refugees while situating themselves within these frameworks. Yafa Shanneik and Elisabeth Sobieczky explore the use of body mapping and augmented reality as artistic methodologies for refugees fleeing war in Syria to express their emotions through active participation and to co-create research results. This approach challenges the gendered narratives associated with Muslim refugee women, opposing representations of vulnerability and victimisation. The project, including research conducted in the UK, Germany and Jordan since 2017, critically examines the use of art as a sensualised medium to generate knowledge, discussing its impact on viewers at exhibitions.

4. Conclusions

This second Special Issue is a complement to the first Special Issue published in 2019, concerning all the many dimensions of the complex relations between arts, migration and refugees worldwide. More research and publications will be welcome in the future to continue exploring this fascinating topic.

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