

Reframing Migrant Narratives through Arts Practice

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Abstract: In this article, we reflect on our collaborative practice-as-research piece *Project Finding Home*, that arose from our experiences of working and living in the UK as ‘non-British’ citizens. Engaging with other refugee and migrant artists over three years, we worked deliberately as co-researchers and co-creators in a non-hierarchical dynamic to produce a series of four films reflecting on how we find home when it is so impacted by government policy, social and cultural integration, and intergenerational relationships. This article focuses on two of these films, one made with the participatory theatre company of Sanctuary, PSYCHEdelight, and one made with conceptual artist, Khaled Barakeh. Through observations of their work, we discuss how their respective uses of comedy (in PSYCHEdelight’s show *Mohand and Peter*) and visual representation (in Barakeh’s installation *On the Ropes*) resist singular views of migrant narratives. Additionally, we analyse our creative and ethical processes for making films with them about their work. Discussing how their aesthetics informed our processes for showcasing who they are and what they do as artists to a wider audience, we examine how artistic practice, its documentation, and its dissemination can question dominant aesthetic norms and existing migration and cultural policies in the UK and Europe.

Keywords: co-creation; migration; art and performance; cultural policy



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1. Introduction

In September 2015, the world was shocked and shaken when the media published the image of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old toddler who drowned off the coast of Turkey while attempting to flee Syria. The image humanized the Syrian refugee crisis and became the defining symbol of the plight of refugees entering Europe. In early 2016, in an effort to keep the public engaged, a photo emerged of China’s most famous dissident artist, Ai Weiwei, imitating Kurdi’s dead body. For the recreation, Weiwei lay on a pebbled beach on the Greek island of Lesbos, an island that has been a key point of entry into the European Union for thousands of refugees. His pose was similar to that of Kurdi’s lifeless body, and the image was taken by photographer Rohit Chawla for the magazine *India Today* and an accompanying exhibition at the India Art Fair. Weiwei and his team were involved in the staging of the image while working in a studio on Lesbos as part of several projects engaging the refugee crisis. However, while many supported this political art intervention (Lakshmi 2016), there was vocal criticism about how artists and the art world engaged with the refugee crisis. Those who were outraged by the photograph labeled it callous and careerist. According to an article in the *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung*, the image was as follows: “...unsettling. It draws attention to something terrible, something that is still going on; it is also part of an out-of-control art market, whose currency is attention. Is it powerful political art or an embarrassing stunt?” (DW Docfilm 2017). Dhillon (2016) further connected Weiwei’s work to a wider problem in cultural policy that keeps the “role of the artist stagnant and unchanged—a part of the whole, a cog in the neoliberal capitalist art world machine that contributes to maintaining the status quo”. She also critiqued artists for being out of touch with refugees’ experience of the world and their everyday reality. To

this point, Abdullah Kurdi (Alan Kurdi's father), while understanding Weiwei's motives, responded to the image with consternation:

I was not asked beforehand and was completely shocked. I know that Ai Weiwei really does want to do something for refugees and that is a good thing, but I should also have been considered. I am the father and I have to live with this. (Connor 2016)

While Weiwei carries his own lived migrant experience (that drives much of his artmaking practice), Kurdi's feelings emphasize the criticality of nuanced care and understanding that not all migrant artists represent one another's experiences. According to Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2020, p. 17):

Responses to displacement—whether by academics, artists or advocates, politicians, practitioners or people with or without personal or family displacement histories—must be acutely critical of, rather than risk reproducing, paternalistic and neo-colonial discourses and practices, including the drive to 'help' and 'save' 'them'.

Ai Weiwei's controversial artwork exemplifies numerous complexities in current convergences of art, migration, and crisis. By contributing specific questions to longstanding debates about who creates what, where, how, and when, Weiwei provokes inquiry into both the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of such politically charged artmaking. What kinds of expressions of art can raise awareness while also ensuring care for those most impacted? What role do artists (with lived migration experience) and cultural institutions play in limiting or expanding understandings of the wide and varied lived experience of forced migration?

This article will explore these questions through an examination of aesthetic and ethical practices that challenge stereotypes and advocate for agency. Beginning with a review of the ways in which current migration policy in both the UK and Europe creates 'parallel systems' that impact and infiltrate cultural policy, we will examine current recommendations for how cultural institutions might move from antiquated approaches of further marginalizing 'newcomers', to more multi-directional exchange whereby migrants and refugees from politically fraught countries can co-inform cultural policies and aesthetics with residents of 'safer' host countries. We will then share two case studies that enact distinct aesthetic and ethical approaches to making art in response to lived migrant experience: PSYCHEDelight's theatre piece *Mohand and Peter*, produced in the UK and Khaled Barakeh's installation *On the Ropes*, produced in Germany. These two artworks were documented as part of a three-year international research study, *Project Finding Home*, which explored migrant artists' relationships to complicated concepts of home.

Throughout this article, we will move between more formal and informal registers as we become part of the research and filmmaking processes. 'We' are two researcher-artists with varied lived experiences of migration. Elena grew up during the Yugoslavian civil war, experiencing forced displacement as a child; Carolyn connects most directly to the migration crisis through her grandparents' forced displacement experiences from Hungary and Poland due to persecution during the First and Second World Wars.

2. Parallel Systems in the Political Realm

In 2012, the UK's then home secretary, Theresa May, introduced the 'hostile environment' policy, which set out to render the everyday lives of undocumented migrants so difficult that they would want to leave the country voluntarily (Kirkup and Winnet 2012). In addition to creating a set of restrictions for undocumented migrants, this policy also affected documented migrants and ethnic minorities with citizenship.

The Government requires employers, landlords, private sector workers, NHS (National Health Service) staff and other public servants to check a person's immigration status before they can offer them a job, housing, healthcare or other

support. Landlords and employers can face fines and even criminal sanctions if they fail to do so. (Liberty 2018, p. 5)

Liberty clarifies that these policies have amounted to state-sanctioned discrimination and the flouting of human rights laws (ibid.). Such anti-migration discourse also correlates with a rise in racist attacks, especially since the Brexit referendum in 2016. As journalist Daniel Trilling notes in the podcast *Borderline* with Isabelle Rougho, these policies form “a kind of parallel system just for immigrants, with biometric visas initially, various forms of ID cards for asylum seekers and other kinds of immigrants, people who’ve been given leave to remain and so on, who are being monitored in a way that the native-born UK citizen population is not” (Rougho 2018).

Such concepts of parallel systems manifest across Europe as well. With different countries distinguishing between ‘refugees’ and ‘irregular migrants,’ contradictory practices between inclusion and exclusion sustain as some countries welcome and grant access to services, while others refuse, or enact ambiguous stances through the detainment of asylum seekers in ‘buffer zones’ within mainland Europe or in collaboration with third-party countries outside of Europe. From freedom of movement to housing, healthcare, and employment opportunities, the spectrum of access for some and not others ranges from inconsistent to inhumane. Even in Germany, the EU country that has taken in the most number of refugees fleeing from Syria since 2015, there are rising concerns over increasing numbers of refugees impacting already scarce public resources, tensions surrounding migrant housing in local residential areas, and a growing sentiment amongst citizens expressing a preference for “asylum seekers with high employability, consistent asylum testimonies and severe vulnerabilities, and Christians over Muslims” (Liebe et al. 2018). Such narratives of ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ migrants have only exacerbated as both the EU and the UK’s open-armed and quick reception of Ukrainian refugees stands in stark contrast to a mostly exclusionary and slow approach towards those who have been seeking asylum from political turmoil in the Middle East and Africa (Nur Osso 2022). This intersectionality of race, religion, and ethnicity entangles with geographical identities, compounding parallel systems with deep lines of segregation and discrimination.

3. Parallel Systems in Cultural Policy

These ubiquitous parallel systems permeate cultural policy as well. From the relegation of showing migrant artists on specific ‘refugee awareness’ days or weeks in the year, to the design of programming that instrumentalises the role of art for refugees (i.e., as a mechanism for integration, social cohesion, or the replay of the traumatic migrant experience), there are conspicuous and more subtle ways in which art in the context of migration plays out in segregated models. As highlighted by a report by Migrants in Culture, based on a UK-wide survey conducted between May and July 2019, 90% of responders felt angry and/or fearful about the Hostile Environment. Collecting key information from the day-to-day experiences of both migrant and non-migrant cultural workers, the survey’s findings revealed that since the launch of the Hostile Environment, both migrants and citizens of colour have experienced increased hardship manifesting in overt discrimination and racial profiling, financial pressures, and emotional stress within the work place (Migrants in Culture 2019b). The impact of the Hostile Environment policies on the intersection of migration and race highlights the links between the current oppressive immigration system and similar systems developed by colonial forces in the past. Through the de-personalisation of migrants in political narratives, the erasure of the experiences of marginalized groups (mostly people of colour and women) repeats. As noted in the testimonies section of the report:

I know that the Hostile Environment Policy causes extreme stress for migrant workers and workers of colour in the cultural sector, as well as creating for those people real conditions of precarity and vulnerability in relation to economic and housing stability, and exposure to racist regimes of monitoring and surveillance. [

...] All of this has a serious, detrimental impact on those working in the cultural sector and so on the cultural sector itself. (*Migrants in Culture 2019a*, p. 2)

As many institutions within the UK and Europe begin to grow an awareness of the problematic infrastructures that have kept refugee/migrant artists excluded, there is still a long road ahead to achieving a deeply embedded understanding of what inclusion and equity actually entail. There is an identified complacency entangled with ignorance in the cultural sector; individuals in senior management positions lack knowledge around the Hostile Environment policy and the specific needs and experiences of migrant cultural workers (*Migrants in Culture 2019a*). Other reports, like *Promoting the inclusion of Europe's Migrants and Minorities in Arts and Culture* (funded by the European Commission in 2021), address this with three main areas that hold potential for both progression and regression: 1. access and participation in mainstream cultural activity, 2. co-production of cultural programming, and 3. embedding diversity within the institution (*Salgado and Patuzzi 2022*, p. 2). In terms of access, the report notes there are many efforts taking place from reduced admission costs to targeted programmes outside institutions in underserved geographic locations to more interactive programmes designed around integration and welcome that then become gateways to other cultural offerings (*ibid*). While these initiatives do achieve engagement and a range of benefits, they have been critiqued for sustaining a separation between education and outreach programming versus 'main' programming. In *The Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees: The Role of Cultural Organisations* (*Vlachou 2017*), Sophie Henderson, Director of the Museum of Migration, recognizes this point as she reflects on the 2016 exhibition *Call me by my Name: Stories from Calais and Beyond*:

Another thing we might have improved with the exhibition was to encourage greater exposure to different audiences—many of those who came, though ethnically diverse, and spanning a range of ages, were largely highly educated and fairly highly engaged with the cultural sector. The school children who visited the exhibition with their teachers, by contrast, tended to be underprivileged with much less prior cultural engagement than our adult visitors. Ideally, we would like to broaden our reach, so as to bring in a different kind of adult audience. We lack the resources, for now, to take this exhibition outside London, but it would be really interesting to test its appeal and impact in different areas of the country, particularly where attitudes towards migrants are less sympathetic. (2017, p. 70)

This growing awareness underlines what many reports identify as a necessity for co-creating programming with migrant artists and communities in order to develop more relevant, authentic, and ethical inclusion. To this point, co-curation is happening more and more, but it finds limitations when "they are often scattered, one-off projects that are infrequently evaluated and replicated. These initiatives can also easily fall into the trap of 'folklorisation' if they emphasise the distance between 'migrant art' or 'ethnic art' and mainstream culture." (*Salgado and Patuzzi 2022*, p. 3). This distance can be further enhanced when representations are reduced to singular narratives. As argued by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, humanitarian-driven 'pro-refugee' narratives and images "typically represent, and therefore constitute, refugees as suffering victims" (2020, p. 2). She further argues that:

These representations and responses tend to position refugees as particular 'types' of people who require external intervention to variously 'save', 'assist', 'protect' or 'control' them. . . . , these representations position non-refugee actors as actual and potential agents, while refugees are, and have to be, acted upon. (2020, p. 3)

Salgado and Putuzz additionally raise the "short-term nature of many of these initiatives, combined with the fact that participants are often not paid for their contributions, [which] can lead migrants and minorities to feel like they have been used to boost an institution's reputation as socially conscious" (2022, p. 2). Here the parallel system becomes pronounced as we see separate cultural policies in terms of programming and pay structures. This is furthered by complexities around presumptions of reception: that this work will be received differently by different audiences, critiqued or not for its aesthetics,

or prescribed a new set of values for art as it relates to an institution's social responsibilities. This replays and extends [Bourdieu's \(1979\)](#) distinction of art and taste within class systems to hierarchies of national and cultural identity. And in subtler ways, points to the less visible infrastructures that perpetuate these hierarchies, as the capacity for evaluation of such programming is often limited by budgets and time. Additionally, in the reporting, developing awareness and acknowledgement does exist, refugee/migrant communities (those most impacted by these programmes) are usually left out of the evaluation process. Salgado and Putuzz thus point to the need for institutions to more deeply embed diversity within staff hiring—particularly in leadership and managerial positions:

Some institutions have taken steps to do so, such as hiring an inclusion advisor, changing recruitment procedures, or partnering with civil-society organisations to identify exclusionary practices and features within the sector. But overall, diversity management in European cultural institutions is still at very early stages and remains largely dependent on the commitment of individual leaders or staff. Organisational commitments to diversity are rarely translated into concrete measures and objectives, and cultural institutions often lack in-house capacity and resources to drive long-term structural change . . . (2022, p. 2)

To this point, several reports and the work of cultural activists and artists remind us that such infrastructural change is long-term work that requires constant unlearning and co-learning. From the problems of tokenistic hires, to deeply rooted fears of working in new ways, to the lack of historical precedents, we are living in what artist Jorge Lopes (a migrant artist from South America who works primarily in Canada) notes as a time of 'recognition' that has not yet moved to 'redistribution' (2021). Speaking as part of a panel on migrant-led arts initiatives organised for our *Project Finding Home* conference ([Project Finding Home 2021a](#)), his point was furthered by Aine O'Brien (director and founder of Counterpoint Arts, a medium-sized UK organization that supports the work of refugee/migrant artists, seeking to ensure they are recognised in British culture). She noted that the pandemic has allowed for closer working relationships between large and small-scale organizations, which helps keep the larger ones more in touch with understandings of equity. But she also noted that there is already a slipback and a risk of further retreat to older policies of separation because of the current cost of living crisis (impacted further by the pandemic, Brexit, and now the war in Ukraine). Attributing this retreat to a hierarchical relationship endemic to the UK, Ireland, and Europe—where policy is 'handed down', rather than co-shaped with artists, O'Brien noted policy language as a key deterrent to forward momentum: "This [cultural policy] language is alienated not only from the phenomena of which it represents, but also from those policy makers creating the language" ([Project Finding Home 2021b](#)).

Speaking to a lack of humanity now regularly affiliated with data-driven migration policy language across the globe, the risk of speaking in broad terms, numbers, and identity politics alone creates an even greater 'us' v. 'them' mentality within all parts of socio-economic-political life that then gets inherited by cultural institutions. Disrupting these problematic legacies with co-created practices that aim to resist such hierarchical dilemmas was the starting point for our research project and the case studies we will now discuss.

4. Finding Home: Challenging Gatekeeping and Stereotypical Representation

In 2018, we started working on the three-year international research study, *Project Finding Home: Migration, Placemaking, & Research Creation*. As summarized by co-investigator Marusya [Bociurkiw \(2021, p. 6\)](#), *Project Finding Home* "foregrounds the idea that migration is story, and story is survival". When originally planning the UK side of the project, with co-researcher and filmmaker Winstan Whitter, we deliberately developed a co-creative and auto-ethnographic approach to study borders and migration. As argued by author and academic Shahram [Khosravi \(2011, p. 5\)](#), this enables research that can "explore abstract concepts of policy and law and translate them into cultural terms grounded in everyday life".

In the next sections, we will briefly describe the research design and methods, before elaborating on two case studies. We will highlight how migrant-led research can challenge existing knowledge production on migrant journeys by enabling a co-creation process between groups of participants and researchers. With a focus on centring the visibility of lived experiences and embodied and situated knowledge, we engaged creative practices in our research methodology to challenge the linearity of traditional academic knowledge production. This methodological approach builds on the work of social scientists, ethnographers, and artist-researchers, who in past decades have advocated for a better understanding of migrants' own perspectives of their migratory experience through a variety of communication, such as non-English language, cultural practices, body language, and artistic expression (Conquergood 2002; Arendt 2007; Cox 2017; Lenette 2022; Petersen 2021). This approach is entangled and potentially sprawling, but it also allows space for nuances and the construction of knowledge that is not exclusively bound within Western academic principles. Engaging in a dialogue with six migrant artists over a period of three years, we worked deliberately as co-researchers and co-creators in a non-hierarchical dynamic. We ate together, took our time, shared stories of our own personal journeys, and eventually co-created a series of films that explored how we find home when it is so impacted by government policy, social and cultural integration, and intergenerational relationships.

Including our own lived experiences with migration was critical to resisting the problems of 'looking at' migration. Taking applied arts practitioner and academic James Thompson's notion of 'looking with' (Thompson 2009), we shared our personal histories of migration with all of the participating artists, acknowledging our awareness of the safety we held as researchers in connection with an academic institution as well as the privileges we each had with legal permanent status in the UK (which was not the case for all of our co-creators). Additionally, a guiding principle of 'looking with' sustained throughout the editing process. Overseen predominantly by Winstan Whitter, we created a consistent process of approval, ensuring everyone involved in the filming agreed with the content and representation. And in the case of Barakeh's film, he preferred to use an editor he works with regularly in Berlin, so we shifted our budget allocation to facilitate this.

Within the context of this article, we want to clarify our use of the term 'migrant artists.' It is important to underline that we did not assume a homogeneous migrant identity, even as many of our research co-creators have to confront a homogenized stereotypical construction. Nevertheless, our social positioning, our experiences, and our strategies of identification are diverse. With first, second, and third generational journeys from Sudan, Syria, Nigeria, Chile, and Jamaica, there were a range of differing migration statuses (refugees, asylum seekers, and those awaiting residency status), linguistic knowledge, educational background, and class and citizenship. Additionally, some of us grew up in Western countries as second- and third-generation migrants and some of us were newer to migrant journeys. Throughout the research, we developed and sustained an awareness for the impacts that these differences could have and did have on the research practice; sometimes, different lived experiences either enabled or hindered participation.

When we started contacting potential co-creators to join us on this project, we encountered two themes consistently: gatekeeping and (dis)engagement with the topic of migration. As part of our process of questioning and considering the implications of our positionalities, privileges, and complicity within existing cultural structures, we strived to look critically through our collaborators' varied lenses at these issues as they emerged. To this point, we briefly define these challenges before we expound on our applied experience in the case studies section of this article.

4.1. Gatekeeping

As argued by Cerian and Skop, "Co-production of knowledge is identified by researchers and policy-makers as central to the advancement of scientific endeavors to address societal challenges, and as a process of empowerment which improves linkages

between theory, knowledge, and action” (Cerian and Skop 2020). However, as they elaborate on their work on the International Rescue Committee’s *New Roots Program*, where they implemented co-production methodologies, Cerian and Skop also draw attention to the messiness that manifests as the co-production process unfolds, especially the power dynamics that come with forming relationships with various gatekeepers (resettlement agencies, case workers, cultural educational officers, etc.). Similarly, in *Project Finding Home*, we started to question the notion of co-production and observed situations in which migrants and refugees were relegated to specific roles that limited the potential of the individual. As concluded by Cerian and Skop, in co-production, “the key role of gatekeepers means that theory and reality collide as power hierarchies emerge and the process unfolds” (2020). In our case, we observed this particularly during the early stages of the research when we started to approach various artists from migrant and refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds. Often, the only way to communicate with the artists was through gatekeepers (company directors, producers, educational directors of institutions, etc.). We noticed that some gatekeepers, in an attempt to ‘protect’ the interests of the artists, took away their agency to decide if they wanted to join certain projects. We also observed in many productions (theater, film, and installations) that this lack of agency can manifest through a kind of ‘voiceless’ presence. We see the artist, but we hear the story through a mediator, typically a native English speaker. We felt that this reinforced what Fiddian-Qasmiyeh calls ‘pro-refugee’ narratives, positioning the migrant artist as a person who requires external intervention to ‘assist’ or ‘protect’ them (2020). Encountering these gatekeeping phenomena was an important stage in our research design; it determined the size of our sample and our modes for enacting a co-production methodology. We decided to work with a very small group of artists (only six) and developed a long-term collaboration that could give us space to better understand how we could work together across time and space. Developing an awareness of this subtle landscape also played a significant role in setting intentions to portray the complexity of migrant existence rather than adjust any stories to fit within a western-centric observational model. Each collaboration evolved organically, revealing varying degrees of leading and being led by one another’s work, ethics, interests, and mutual concerns about the migration crisis.

4.2. (Dis)engagement with the Topic of Migration

During the second stage of our research, when we conducted semi-structured interviews, we noticed a weariness and hesitation from participants to become ‘spokespeople’ for their communities. Often, being boxed into a specific category (by gatekeepers in many cases), not only risks diluting or filtering nuanced migrant experiences through their voices, but it also limits their artistic potential for expression. As voiced by the Latino artist Roberto Sifuentes in an interview with Marchevska, the complexity of being a migrant, political artist is a long-term project:

... having a political voice was really why I wanted to make performance work. I just feel that this kind of work is an ongoing live project. I cannot change my brown skin and this will always be something that I encounter. Racism, displacement, feeling like an outsider/insider in my own home, in my own country, in my own city will always happen. I find pockets of community where I can feel really at home and not be so enraged.

The work remains constant and the art world will sometimes embrace you, sometimes not, but they are not your audience. They are not the only people we’re speaking to, right? (Sifuentes with Marchevska 2017, p. 53)

In conversation with Sifuentes and others, we also observed that such hesitations are connected to issues of ‘selectiveness’, which again interrelates with gatekeeping. Sometimes artists feel like their work is only used when institutions want to signal their ‘willingness and support’ for refugees or in response to various crises (wars, earthquakes, etc.). Without migrant-situated knowledge and migrant-led decision-making at the forefront of program-

ming and curating in cultural venues, artists note a perpetuated marginalization. It thus became an essential value to ensure our collaborative practices in *Project Finding Home* were co-decided and co-created.

The next section details our two case studies, where we will apply some of the theoretical and practical challenges we have discussed thus far.

4.3. PSYCHEdelight: Co-Creation, Solidarity, and Humour as Modus Operandi

PSYCHEdelight is a UK-based Theatre Company of Sanctuary developed by French director Sophie Besse in 2011. Dedicated to “celebrating diversity and promoting social inclusion by bringing marginalised communities and local people together through creative workshops and productions” (Besse 2022), the company is particularly interested in the way in which comedy and laughter can offer relief to the stress and tensions associated with marginalised identities. In 2017, the company began working with refugees in Calais, France, in the infamous ‘Jungle’ refugee camp and subsequently developed the production *Borderline*—a comedy about the day-to-day life in the Calais Jungle. According to the poet and translator Antoine Cassar (2017),

Borderline is one of first contemporary border-related plays in UK, that identifies as a full-blown comedy and presents a satire of the Calais Jungle, co-written and co-performed by people who have lived it and have the bravery to look back at the absurdities of their experience . . . Part slapstick, part farce, a troupe of eleven actors spanning seven nationalities (Afghan, British, Chilean, French, Palestinian, Sudanese, Syrian), all barefoot, play out a series of sketches woven together with the shoe as leitmotif.”

Borderline featured a ‘Jungle’ fashion show, a health-and-safety bureaucrat ensuring no ‘rules on the list’ were broken by under-eighteens attempting to jump onto a train, and a ukulele-playing volunteer searching for Syrians to comfort with her out-of-tune instrument. Using jokes drawn from the experiences of the actors, who are themselves former residents of the Calais Jungle, the company was intrigued to discover the effectiveness of laughter as an “antidote to stress, trauma, exclusion and isolation. . . an empowering and magic tool to transform pity into admiration” (Besse 2022). A key part of the company’s vocabulary is the use of simple props, often employed for multiple transformative and playful effects, including opportunities for multilingualism, especially in non-European languages. Driven by camaraderie and solidarity, the show also established a way of working that the company would propagate and use in the next five years.

When we approached them in 2019, PSYCHEdelight had started work on their new show, *Mohand and Peter*, a two-hander physical comedy that would flip the usual outsider narrative as Mohand (a Sudanese refugee seeking asylum in the UK) brings Peter (a British native) to visit the beauty and complexity of his home country, Sudan. In a reflection on the inspiration for the show, Besse shared:

Every day for the past 5 years since we created *Borderline*, I witnessed how much my cast miss their homes. I saw pictures of beautiful lakes, mountains, and ancient buildings; videos of family gatherings, birthdays, and silly cats. I Facetimed brothers, sisters, but also nieces and nephews. Those kids that we spoil at weekends but that the people I work with have never held in their arms because they are not allowed to go back. Not for a wedding, not for a funeral, never. Their country is not just a war zone or a Talibans’ nest, it’s their homes. (Besse 2022)

When we first met to discuss her company’s involvement with *Project Finding Home*, she also shared her own discomforts with understanding home as a native French director who now questioned whether a post-Brexit UK would accept her. But while these deeply serious themes and realities underpin PSYCHEdelight’s work, it is the comedy that she and her co-creators find essential in how they express migration.

We initially booked a filming session during their rehearsal week in late November 2019 to capture the process of making. It was a chilly gray day, and we met in front of the Young Vic rehearsal space, close to London's Southbank cultural quarter, where PSYCHEdelight receives in-kind rehearsal space.

After ordering the needed coffees for the morning start time, we were welcomed straight into the rehearsal room. The space was cold but light, and we all warmed ourselves by the tiny electric heater in the corner of the room. Besse called the actors to prepare; our collaborating filmmaker, Winstan Whitter, prepared different camera lenses and mics. And then very quickly we were transported into a Sudanese household, while actors (Peter and Mohand in real life) rehearsed scenes of Peter's visit to Mohand's village. We could almost feel the desert and the hot air as Mohand slipped into performance mode, confidently guiding us through different landscapes and characters. At lunch, we asked Mohand if we could treat him to his favorite eatery nearby. He took us to a doner kebab shop, just a few meters away from the theatre. While we waited for the order, he told Elena how he now lives in Brighton and works as a delivery driver. He is missing his friends in London, but he also needs to prove that he is a 'productive and independent' member of British society to the asylum seeker's case worker. He always carries a big smile, and when x asks him what would be his ideal job, he immediately says "a Hollywood actor," which he shortly follows with an ironic "but my English is not so good." Mohand discusses a deeply ingrained problem in the cultural sector: how western-centric all of its ideas are. There is very little space for actors who come from migrant or refugee backgrounds.

A couple of weeks later, we recorded work-in-progress showing of the piece at Theatre Deli (a fringe venue in East London) with an audience that was a mix of diaspora and UK communities that audibly enjoyed the story. Some jokes are specific to Sudanese culture, some cross all cultures; we recognize our own grandmothers' warmth and hilarity in Mohand's grandmother character, constantly serving food and asking very direct questions about her family's love lives. Our final film for *Project Finding Home*, called *Staging Home* (Marchevska et al. 2021) (<https://www.projectfindinghome.net/home-is-in-the-art/> accessed on 1 August 2022) cuts together footage of the final performance with rehearsal footage and is co-edited with approval from Sophie, Peter, and Mohand. Mohand suggests music for us to use to underscore the final film and the final edit is shared with Sophie to use as she deems fit for PSYCHEdelight's website and future promotional and funding needs.

Two years after we originally met for the project, in June 2022, we had a chance to view a more developed version of the production. After the pandemic, PSYCHEdelight managed to secure funding to restage the piece and show it for almost a month in a small, fringe theater called Southwark Playhouse in south London. When we arrived for the Saturday matinee, we joined an audience that was predominantly from the Sudanese diaspora. This became evident throughout the show—especially during sections that used Sudanese music—the audience sang and clapped along. The show was also subtitled in Arabic, integrating more Arabic into the play than the previous time. Some jokes passed us by, but there was a relaxed and joyful atmosphere that we later reflected made us feel included.

Throughout the show, audience laughter merged with singing and tears. In the post-show discussion, many expressed gratitude for seeing their stories and their parents' stories embodied on stage. Some also discussed the intensity and power of the scene where Mohand and Peter join in with the protesters in Sudan. We learned that this story reflects a still-fresh history, triggering joy as well as painful memories. After the Q&A, many audience members lingered to talk with the actors and the director and take pictures with the set and with each other. Observing such cross-cultural, multi-lingual interactions within and after the performance illuminated a multi-dimensional view of migrant stories and experiences.

4.4. *On the Ropes: Khaled Barakeh and Art Practice as Active Resistance to Stereotyping*

We first met artist and cultural activist Khaled Barakeh at The Tate Modern for “[Who Are We?](#)” (2019), an event organized by Counterpoint Arts as part of refugee week in June 2019. The details of this first encounter speak to the complexities we have raised around gatekeepers and cultural programming. Barakeh, an artist born in Syria and based in Berlin, was invited by Counterpoint Arts to present his work at The Tate. This event took place as part of the initiative Tate Exchange, on the fifth floor of the museum, in a workshop space not easily accessible to the public and specifically programmed as part of one week of cultural programming in the UK devoted to refugees. We might not have met Barakeh if not for all of those convergences. The point being that we as academics and artists seek out such events—and if not for our own networks, or cultural behaviours, or availability within this one week, we would have missed such exposure. Who presents work, how they do it, where and for whom are all critical questions that recurred in our collaboration with Barakeh.

Intrigued by his presentation at the Tate that day in June about his ongoing collaborative project ‘Coculture’ (which has created its own curatorial model supporting Syrian artists who have been displaced across the globe through a range of initiatives, projects, and funds), we began a conversation with him about the possibilities of collaborating on *Project Finding Home*. From our first conversations, he was very clear with us that engaging in any sort of project where he would be the spokesperson for Syrian migrant culture was not of interest. There were too many nuanced experiences for him alone to represent, and since he speaks at many arts and migration events across Europe and the globe, this position would risk not only the fatigue of consistently re-rehearsing his own narrative but also the perpetuation of reductive and singular narratives of the Syrian migrant experience. With our shared yearnings to create artistic expressions that could speak to the many dilemmas within forced migration contexts, we began to meet virtually every two months to discuss new project ideas. With all of us determined to resist ‘talking head’ documentary film techniques, we worked in a way that prioritised Barakeh’s creative insight and our potential to support its fruition. As with all the artist collaborations on *Project Finding Home*, we took our time and used food as an entry point into deeper relationship building. Even as the pandemic prevented us from meeting again in physical space, we exchanged self-made home videos of us preparing meals in our own homes in London and Berlin, respectively. For someone who is devoted to creating and supporting art reflective of the deep and complex impacts of war-torn Syria, Barakeh also enjoys cooking pasta with tomatoes and olives while watching old episodes of *Grey’s Anatomy*. This level of normalcy and mundane human existence is often overlooked in migrant narratives.

After considering many project ideas for this collaboration, Barakeh decided to return to an older work he had made in 2015 called *On the Ropes*. This installation of suspended objects and furniture in his Frankfurt-based studio spoke to the groundlessness he felt in response to returning to Germany after a trip home to Syria during the start of the revolution in 2011, knowing he would not be able to go back. At the time, he lived in his studio, struggling to find a home to rent as a single male, freelance artist, and refugee. He reflected with us that while attempting to stay connected to the conflict back home in Syria “through screens and social media,” he was soon overwhelmed with a debilitating grief.

I ended up with depression for quite a long time- living in this place in Atelier Frankfurt where I felt like everything around me is shaking . . . it was slowly the realisation that I can’t go back home anymore. (Barakeh 2020)

When the Atelier organized its annual open house studios, Barakeh decided to share his experience by suspending all of his belongings and furniture.

Expressing states of anxiety and instability, every item and piece of furniture in the artist’s studio was suspended 15 cm above the ground by invisible fishing wire. Opened to the public, the studio was transformed into a gallery space, and the artwork morphed into a stage of its own, allowing the audience to

walk through emotions that are usually hidden away and viewed as a sign of vulnerability. (Barakeh 2020)

For *Project Finding Home*, Barakeh decided to revisit *On the Ropes*, editing together documented footage from follow-on sharings of it in Berlin and Paris. In the two films that we co-decided to call *Suspending Home*, Barakeh shares with us a meditative reflection on the constant presence of absence. Given the chance to view this suspension of objects while listening to a layered set of global voices discuss vulnerability in broad terms, we feel invited to reflect with Barakeh, as we have been getting to know him, but also to reflect with a wider world. Without a face to pin the experience to, the artwork seems to resist usual portrayals of migrant vulnerabilities through more expansive and layered expression, reminding us that his experience of vulnerability is part of a collective one where viewers might be invited to consider their own.

5. Discussion

As these two case studies provoke complex and multi-layered experiences of home for migrant artists, they critically draw attention to the possibilities for aesthetics to expand views of migration within both policy and cultural contexts. *Mohand and Peter* flip the narrative of who is a visitor in another's land and, rather than focus on 'otherness' as problematic, instead demonstrate ideas of joyful welcome and curiosity. Humour is key in their unlikely friendship, facilitating a playful approach to intercultural understandings and misunderstandings, even against Sudan's dangerous backdrop of political strife. Barakeh's more serious reflection on the groundlessness of refugee status in a host country takes us beyond the 'face of suffering' and instead points to a universal feeling of discomfort expressed through the levitation of familiar domestic objects. In both artworks, an aesthetics of invitation and inclusion disrupt limiting hierarchical relationships that manifest in both migrant and cultural policy, as discussed at the beginning of this article. PSYCHEDelight and Barakeh prioritise what makes us human: friendship, emotions, and how we live and get along in our day-to-day. And such joyful curiosity, feeling welcome and universality within their chosen content reverberated in the relationships we developed throughout *Project Finding Home* as we were guided by their experiences, their perspectives, and their desires for how they wanted to be presented. We continue to partner with Barakeh, most recently in the presentation of our *Project Finding Home* films at a school in the US. Taking the lead in a post-presentation Q&A, Barakeh asked the students about their migration histories and how they construct their own multi-cultural backgrounds. This line of inquiry opened up dialogue and multi-directional understanding that sets an example for how we might shift restricted views of migration.

6. Conclusions

While continuously fraught with many obstacles reflective of political parallel systems, cultural policy in the UK and Europe shows signs of moving towards more equitable and inclusive practice. As many artists and cultural activists in this article have expressed, such progression is highly dependent on migrant-situated knowledge and migrant-led programming. In this article, we have examined how co-creative processes can make an important contribution to intersectional research on migration by challenging existing modes of cultural operation. How an aesthetics of inclusion (such as humour and multilingualism in PSYCHEDelight's *Mohand and Peter* and the disorientation of domestic furniture and layering of multiple global voices in Barakeh's *On the Ropes*) not only concretizes expanded understandings of varied migrant experiences but also functions as spaces of imagination for all audiences to connect with (whether they are migrants or not). As O'Brien reflected in a panel discussion for *Project Finding Home* with Barakeh and Lopes ([Project Finding Home 2021b](#)), such consideration for an aesthetics of inclusion can help counter the parallel systems in the cultural policy landscape that keep concepts of art and concepts of migration separate. We move from a problematic 'looking at' to Thompson's critical 'looking with.' Such relational shifts available in artistic practice hold more possibility for equity

between subject/viewer/artist/audience that could extend into political relationships like newcomer/long-term resident or even policy maker (2009).

As many reports recommend, this article advocates for more development, documentation, and dissemination of co-created methodologies in the cultural field in order to more fully and equitably examine migrant artists' experiences and artistic practice. As we have shown through the case studies, co-creation as a practice is allowing artists and participants to explore emotional and embodied aspects of their everyday lives on their own terms. For future studies, it is also important that researchers recognise how migrants themselves present their own experiences, views, and values as individuals and how they engage in co-creation rather than only becoming the reflexive object of the skilled researcher. Furthermore, this project has shown how long-term collaboration with migrant artists can contribute to the creation of more inclusive cultural policies for migrants and more cultural understanding for researchers and cultural producers. We recommend that the cultural sector place greater value on process versus immediate outcome, co-creation in programming versus exhibiting/showcasing individuals for specific events, and nurturing future leaders/curators/programmers that have lived experience of migration. In these ways, we can see the potential for long-term positive change that will help Western societies find a way to counter increasingly hostile encounters in intimate, institutional, and public spaces.

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