Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue "Arts and Refugees: Multidisciplinary Perspectives"

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Even though the percentage of migrants and refugees in the world has remained relatively stable over the past few decades, in recent years, public debate on this matter has become increasingly sensitive and politicized. The political discourse has become ever more polarized. On the one hand, especially since 2015 when the crisis in Syria reached its peak, the arrival of refugees in Europe and Germany has been seen as a threat against which European countries should protect themselves. The Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, decided, with the approval of the Cabinet, to build a 4-m high barrier on the border with Serbia and Croatia in order to prevent asylum-seekers and immigrants from entering the country. The Italian Minister of the Interior and Deputy Prime Minister, Matteo Salvini, has several times declared that no new refugees or migrants should reach Italian ports by sea. He has regularly criminalized rescue NGO's at sea, referring to them as migrant and refugee smugglers. In his view, their activity is not humanitarian but criminal, and they should be sued for their actions. These examples are not unique among European politicians, and they espouse views similar to those of President Trump in the United States (US), who is attempting to end "illegal" immigration and build a wall at the Mexican border. Clearly, policies in the field of migration and asylum have become more and more restrictive and increasingly disregard the very notion of human rights at the core of Western democracies. On the other hand, some politicians have endorsed a more open approach toward migration and asylum, especially at the local level. In the US and in Europe, many cities have declared themselves sanctuary cities, and this action is supported by a significant portion of their populations. Moreover, the transnational movement *refugees welcome* has spread throughout Europe, expressing solidarity with all those who are forced to leave their home country.

In the media and policy debates on migration and refugees, some issues are relatively underexplored, such as the relevance of the arts and of artistic practices in the actual integration of refugees into the social fabric. What is the role of arts (music, theatre, literature, etc.) in the solidarity movements in favour of refugees in European cities and beyond? What are the trajectories of refugee artists and their strategies for claiming a position in their new societies and artistic scenes? This Special Issue discusses these questions, as well as the manifold connections between arts and refugees. The five papers come from different disciplines (i.e., anthropology, musicology and sociology) and different theoretical perspectives and deal with different artistic disciplines (i.e., theatre, cinema, music, visual arts and painting). They all combine a robust theoretical approach with a qualitative empirical case study in different European countries (i.e., Germany, Italy, Belgium and the United Kingdom) and cities (i.e., Munich, Brussels, Liège and London).

In their paper, Ruba Totah and Krystel Khoury present and discuss a theatre project developed in Munich in 2017, where the City Theatre organised the Open Border Ensemble of Munich in which Syrian German artists created a mobile theatre play aimed at minimizing stereotypes and deconstructing essentialist cultural identity prejudices. They show how artistic strategies and relational dynamics came together to give birth to a sort of 'third space'. They also discuss the challenges and implications of such theatre projects for all the participants and for the solidarity between refugees and non-refugees.

Located in the context of the social polarization on migration and refugee issues mentioned above, the paper by Annalisa Frisina and Stefania Muresu shows how participatory cinema has become a way of expressing political solidarity with refugees in Italy. This has occurred over the past 10 years by challenging the mainstream narrative of migration and asylum through the proactive involvement of asylum-seekers in cinematographic work. In a country led by a populist anti-refugee government, solidarity and participation go hand in hand to change the dominant perception of migration and refugee flows.

The third paper, written by Hélène Sechehaye and Marco Martiniello, deals with a musical project by a non-profit organization, *Muziekpublique*, launched in Brussels, the capital city of Belgium and the European Union. *Muziekpublique* specializes in the promotion of so-called "world music". The *Refugees for Refugees* project features traditional musicians from different countries who have found refuge in Belgium. Through this case study, they examine the complexity of elaborating a project that is based on the common identity of "refugees" while simultaneously valuing their diversity. They also discuss the impact of such participatory projects on the musicians' careers and integration in the host country.

The subsequent paper also deals with Belgium. Through an investigation of migrants' objectives in participating in the arts, Shannon Damery and Elsa Mescoli try to understand the different ways in which artistic practices can be used by migrants. Through the exploration of the initiatives of groups of undocumented migrants and refugees involved in artistic activities in two Belgian cities (Liège and Brussels), the paper concludes that art can operate as an empowering tool for migrants, as it constitutes a space for agency, notwithstanding the specific characteristics of the context. It allows migrants to develop strategies of visibility or invisibility, depending on their motivations and aims. Through case studies, the authors claim that art offers opportunities for migrants to actively participate in the socio-cultural and political environment in the host country and to claim various forms of official and unofficial belonging and local citizenship.

Finally, the paper by Cristina Cusenza deals mainly with Syrian visual artists in London. She shows that they are often caught in a process of essentialization and othering regardless of their artistic choices in the discursive register of universalism. Nevertheless, they often organize their lives around the 'Syrian artist' category. Their agency is somehow limited, and their artistic contribution outside of the refugee experience is not easily recognized in the professional art world.

In conclusion, the five articles composing this Special Issue illustrate the complexity of the refugee situation and open up avenues of discussion concerning the role arts can play for refugees in anti-immigration times. At the same time, they also highlight the contribution refugee artists can offer their new country. Let us hope that more research on these issues will emerge in the future.

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