



February 2022

REFUGEE ARTS NETWORKS

EXTENDING THE FRAME

PROJECT REPORT



Migrant Dramaturgies Network

New Tides Platform

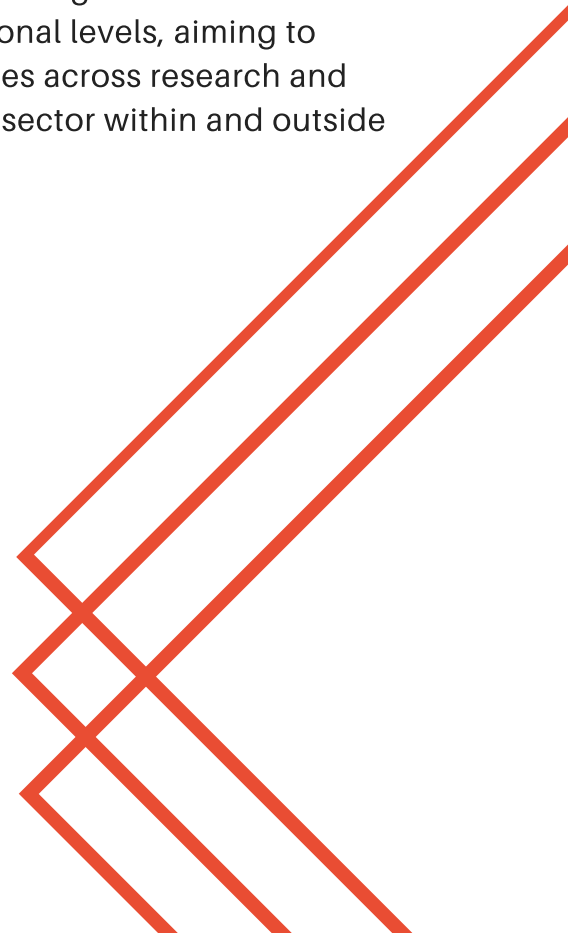
Scope

What are the strategies and challenges faced by refugee artists today? How can networks foster systemic change? How can we develop new frameworks driven by artistic vision created by refugee artists?

This curated panel discussion brought together refugee artists advocacy networks to discuss new models for resilient creative networks, featuring grassroots organisations from the UK, France, Germany and Portugal.

We reached out to communities of artists, scholars, cultural workers and policymakers, aiming to increase visibility and opportunities for refugee artists and groups, to share experiences and practices across geographic and cultural settings.

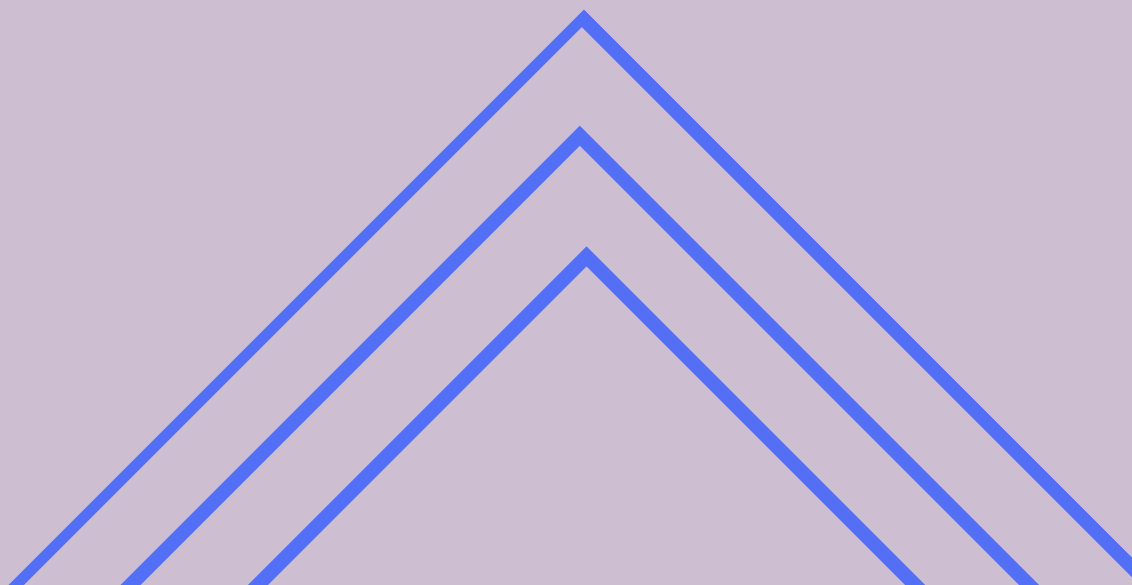
The hybrid event facilitated an open debate on the role of networks in advocating change on various artistic and institutional levels, aiming to build alliances across research and the creative sector within and outside the UK.



Background

This event was the result of a year-long conversation and collaboration between [Community Arts North West \(CAN\)](#), the [Drama Department at the University of Manchester](#), and [New Tides Platform](#).

For over a decade theatre and performance created by refugee artists has played an important role in community arts programmes. While the practices, aesthetics and legacies of refugee arts and artists has gained momentum, less attention has been given to the importance of refugee arts advocacy networks. Since the peak of the so-called European 'refugee crisis', refugee artists have formed advocacy networks to promote inclusivity and diversity across the cultural sector. These networks have been active in addressing issues of displacement, identity and belonging, structural inequalities, and legacies of colonialism. They have developed new policy visions focused on social, structural and institutional change. This project brought together some of these international networks to discuss new ways of cooperation, art-making and support alongside discussing political agency and identity politics.



Theatre and migration research in Drama at the University of Manchester

This project was supported by a **Social Responsibility Award** from the **School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester**

Research and practice around theatre about, with and by refugees and other forced migrants has been a central concern in Drama at UoM since the In Place of War research project (2004-2008). That project has continued as an international arts activist charity: <https://www.inplaceofwar.net/>

Several publications have emerged from this research, notably Performance in Place of War edited by James Thompson, Jenny Hughes and Michael Balfour (2009) and Refugees, Theatre and Crisis: performing global identities by Alison Jeffers (2012). In 2019 Drama at UoM and Community Arts Northwest were successful in securing funding for PhD researcher Ambrose Musiyiwa to undertake the project 'Listening to the Voice of Refugee Artists' which is doing very valuable work in finding out about the work of artists who have been through the British immigration system.

We remain committed to this research and we're excited to see where this project will lead.

Dr Alison Jeffers

Drama in the School of Arts Languages and Cultures
University of Manchester

The networks

Migrants in Theatre (UK) is a movement by first-generation migrant theatre artists and theatre companies who joined efforts to campaign for more and better representation of UK based migrant theatre artists in British theatre. The movement comprises artists from a broad and diverse range of backgrounds and experiences and is open to migrant theatre makers in a multitude of roles, from actors, directors, set designers, playwrights, to stage managers, arts administrators and board members.

MENA Arts (UK) is a new arts organisation for UK-based professionals who are connected to the MENA+ region (Middle East, North Africa and the surrounding area). We celebrate the talent of our membership. Strive to be at the heart of conversations around our identity. Be our own support network. Lobby for the appropriate representation. Advocate for change to increase access and opportunities for employment.

The Agency of Artists in Exile, AA-E (FR) works to identify artists in exile from all origins and disciplines, accompanies them according to their situations and their needs, provides them with workspaces and puts them in contact with professionals (French and European network), in order to give them the means to practise their disciplines and to re-establish themselves in France.

PostHeimat Network (DE) is a continuously developing and progressing network in the field of performing arts, addressing the topics of migration, refuge, identity, multilingualism, and power structures within artistic practices and institutions. PostHeimat was established in 2018 by the artistic groups BOAT PEOPLE PROJEKT, COLLECTIVE MA'LOUBA, EXIL ENSEMBLE, HAJUSOM, OPEN BORDER ENSEMBLE and RUHRORTER.

The Union of Black Artists, UNA (PT) main objectives are the promotion and strengthening of black representation in the Portuguese arts sector, as well as the recognition and enhancement of the intangible heritage of the black population in Portugal. UNA's main focus is to contribute to the development of affirmative action measures in the cultural sector, in conjunction with artists, social movements, public and private organisations.

For full list of speakers, see our [EVENT BOOKLET](#)

Participants

Around **150 people** registered for our event from **20 countries** from Europe, the Americas, Africa, Australia and South Asia.

Attendees included **artists** and **academics**, but the event also attracted **policy specialists**, **culture workers** and **human rights activists**.

We are grateful for participants for actively taking part in the event and contributing with questions and comments throughout the debate.

Key topics discussed

Our conversations focused on **three key areas:**

1. Artistic strategies and challenges faced by refugee artists today

- Looking at the ways artists define their work in relation to lived experiences of forced migration
- Discussing identity categories and their limitations

2. Creative network models

- Exploring some of the reasons behind establishing advocacy networks
- Considering new forms of working with artists and institutions
- Debating issues of sustainability and longevity

3. Policy Visions

- Sharing policy ideas for a systemic change in the arts sector
- Mapping policy agendas on inclusion and diversity



Emerging issues

Contested terminologies & identities

One of the key issues raised by panelists was the problematic terminology of 'refugee arts'/ 'refugee artist'.

I am not a second-class artist. I am not a refugee artist. I am an artist! (Khaled Alwarea, AA-E, France)

- Refugee artists often forced to 'engage in a constant justification' of who they are (Lanna Joffrey, MENA Arts, UK)
- Practices of 'self definition' is crucial to combat racial and ethnic profiling over multiple generations (Anabela Rodrigues, UNA, Portugal)

I am keen on focusing on how refugee or migrant art/theatre doesn't need to be about being a refugee/migrant. How to create space for migrants and refugees to freely create what they would like to create, instead of feeling obligated to stage a cliched version of themselves? (Lara Parmiani, Migrants in Theatre, UK)

- When framing artist subjectivities, we need to be aware of the dynamics between exclusion vs. inclusion (Ruba Totah, PostHeimat Network, Germany)
- Acknowledging experiences of 'multi-migration' and multilingualism (Lanna Joffrey) is key in challenging stereotypes

Don't put us in a box, because we will try to get out of that box (Anabela Rodrigues)

Need for strong representation & advocacy

Issues of migration can open up questions of urban citizenship and collective memory (Lubanzadyo Mpemba, UNA, Portugal)

- Forming advocacy networks and connecting with artists with similar experiences helps re-establishing individual artists in host societies (Judith Depaule, AA-E, France)
- Occupying space is very important in tackling under-representation in all areas of arts and culture (Anabela Rodrigues)

The network came about from a feeling of total invisibility(Lara Parmiani, Migrants in Theatre, UK)

- Cultural elitism, institutional racism and marginalisation remain key concerns
- Access to spaces and opportunities, artists' mobility and new education frameworks would be crucial to enhance visibility

We are creating our own framework and working out how to fit with others(Ramzi DeHani, MENA Arts, UK)

- Refugee arts networks can act as agencies, mediating between artists and the mainstream cultural institutions

Sustainability and longevity

Short-term funding is a real problem, projects need longer investment (Jonas Tinius, PostHeimat Network, Germany)

- Instead of relying on centralised funding schemes, 'resource pulling' from multiple, local or regional sources might be more sustainable, long-term decentralising strategy

Actions and visions

This project showcased a wealth of perspectives on how can we **re-wire** culture, its **hierarchies** and **terminologies** to include refugee perspectives.

Some of the **strategies & directions** nurtured by the invited networks include:

- Showcasing artists and their work via online directories; facilitating connections between artists and the larger cultural sector
 - >> [MENA Arts Directory](#)
 - >> [Agency of Artists in Exile Directory](#)
- Advocating structural change in programming, commissioning, representation and casting via 'town hall' meetings and policy plans
 - >> [Migrants in Theatre: Action Points](#)
- Facilitating new cultural frameworks with a focus on intersectionality, diversity and plurality
 - >> [PostHeimat Network Statement](#)
- Developing a support network for members, and building alliances with the cultural sector
 - >> [Union of Black Artists \(Portugal\): 'Self-mapping'](#)

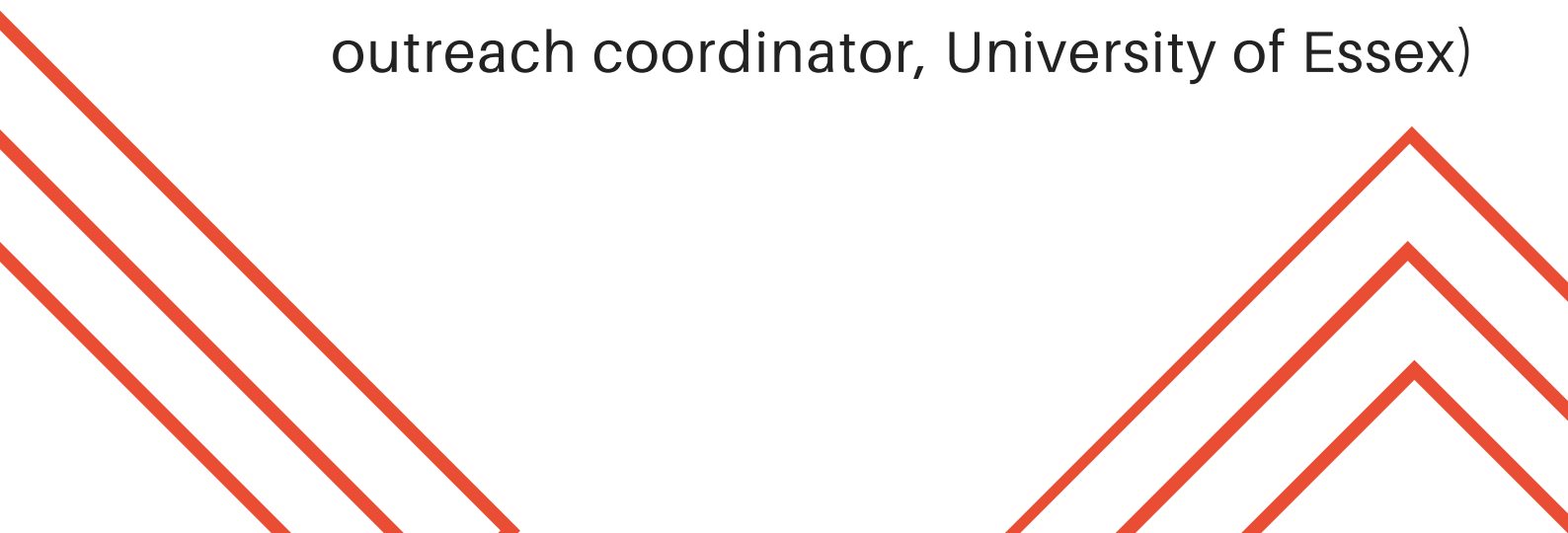
Feedback

I thought the debate was very balanced and inclusive and it was interesting also to hear experiences from artists outside the UK (Lara Parmiani, artistic director, LegalAliens Theatre, London)

Gaining insight into a community of practicing artists has been very useful (Judith Conyers, teacher, Kingston upon Thames)

The work that you do is very important, not only to address inequalities in the cultural sector, but to tackle social and economic inequalities as well (Carolina Triana Cuellar, academic, University of Sussex)

AMAZING afternoon! I look forward to staying in touch with this brilliant network! (Jonathan Man, outreach coordinator, University of Essex)





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www.can.uk.com

www.newtidesplatform.org

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