

Creative Practice and Refugees' Citizenship-forming: a refugee artist's reflections

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Purpose of presentation



To share reflections on the relationship between refugee participation in artistic productions and citizenship forming.

Specifically explore:

- the motivations for & forms of refugee artistic productions,
- their contribution to refugees' citizenship forming, and public empathy and understandings of asylum as an international humanitarian issue, and
- some research gaps - mental health and wellbeing

What citizenship? What data?



Citizenship: social process NOT 'legal' status: belonging, identity, participation, integration

The data:

the 'situatedness' of the 'self'

- do you know what a Du is in Scotland?



A MAD DU!!



other refugees – IKAZE (i.e. 'Artivism'); professional & non-professional artists

Community work – observations relating to environmental/climate justice

Ph.D. study – Some unexpected findings – Refugee art

The motivational contexts of artistic productions



- **Hostile media & policy hostility** - ‘folk devils’, pejorative social/cultural identities & liminal social status [exempted from work and certain welfare benefits]
- **Both compound to:**
 - ✓ **Cause racism and other forms of public hostility towards refugees**
 - ✓ **Make refugees suffer stigma, alienation and isolation**

I think it affects honesty. It makes people lie. Because if I met somebody in the street and [they] said are you an asylum seeker? I would say no! So the representation stigmatises you [H, male, Eritrean]

- ✓ **Retraumatise refugees - psychosocial trauma/mental wellbeing.**

“feel awkward”, “feel distress” (R, female, Nigerian), “sorry that [asylum seekers/refugees] are here”, “fed up” (M, female, Algerian), “put [them] off as a person”, and “demoralised” and “even affects [their] mental health” (D, female, Zimbabwean).

The motivational contexts contd.



- **Contest the media, policy & public hostility**

- ✓ **awareness-raising & education: 'Artivism'**

We want to eradicate their [public] ignorance of asylum seekers, which emanates from biased media coverage; and we try to educate a lot of people [...], and that's why we have the IKAZE drama group [E, male, Burundian]

- **Cultural expression, sharing & preservation – inter-generational transmission**

It is important for my children to understand where I came from – my roots, my culture [S, male, Cameroonian]

The kids are growing in a different culture... I share and teach them my culture as much as I can. Not as much as I would have wanted. But my kids are interacting with the UK kids and therefore they are picking up, many things. But I also keep my tradition and teach them and tell them that when I was in my country this is what my dad used to say or do [L, male, Rwandan]

Artforms & Approach of Artistic Production



What artforms?

- **Socio-cultural arts:** community/cultural celebration events & festivals, international family day event; gastronomy/food & culture
- **Performances & readings:** storytelling, poetry, theatre, drama, song & dance – tours of schools, libraries, museums, festivals, workshops/seminars & conferences
- **Visual Art Productions:** paintings, cultural artefacts, films/videos, photography
- **The internet & social media:** FABULA
- **Written artforms/publications:** poetry, event coverage interviews in hyperlocal and other newsletters, magazines, newspapers, tv and radio.
- **Art-research:** socio-political, environmental/climate and mental health/wellbeing.

Artforms & Approach of Artistic Production



What approach?

- **Real life stories and experiences** – individual and collective stories; human dimension
- **Tours/Community dialogues** - Q&A sessions

I was involved in 'The Flats' a community play based on the Pollok area of Glasgow...a member of the audience wanted to know if I sought asylum to flee poverty and to scrounge on the welfare system [M, female, Algerian]

We go to schools and speak with children about asylum. And this is in primary 7. And the children ask us how we fled. And other many questions, and we answered them. [S, male, Rwandan]

- **Collaborative partnership** - among and with refugee orgs; refugees & locals [as organisers, cast members or as members of the audience]

...that's why we did a drama. It was called The Flat. It was about us and local people [M, female, Algerian]

Artistic practice and refugees' citizenship forming



- **'Responsible' citizenship** - Canvass public empathy; win 'hearts & minds' and understanding of asylum as an international humanitarian issue.

So, after that [the talk in school] when they started to know they changed their minds. If you see now the Pollok in 2007 is not the same Pollock in 2001 Or 2002. [...] Even one of our friends faced bad behaviour from a local family. But when she went to the school, and talk to children, the boy [...] maybe he went home and talked about what he has been told, the lady [the boy's mum] changed her mind and started talking to my friend. My friend said: "when she sees me, she says hello and she told me about what I told her son [in school]". So we got a good result from this project. [M, female, Algerian]

- **Exercise freedom of expression** – context exclusion & misrepresentation in policymaking and cultural spaces (media)

You can see my website and how I use to take cultural activity to schools in the Lothians. So I have been busy all the time.... All the time our views, our thing, are being looked at, reported by others, so that is the great thing with this [website]. It could be bullshit, but it is me doing the talking...I don't need a journalist to write my story.... It [Internet] has given me the tool especially to write. You can see at the end there are people who write their comments. So I communicate with people through this [A, male, Chilean]

Artistic practice and refugees' citizenship forming



- **Sense/feelings of belonging, identification and identity-forming:** community participation & social interactions: inter-ethnic dialogue; social bridging and social connectivity; ethnic & cultural 'bridging' Vs 'bonding'
- **Cultural citizenship/integration** – experience of shared cultural belonging and identity with Scotland; integrate into local community & artistic/storytelling community of practice; local, national and transnational affiliations
- **Lifeline to earn a living**
- **Mental health & wellbeing benefits:** coping, resisting and overcoming stigmatisation and social ostracisation; gaining 'sense of self-esteem'



Much to be learned about:

- the relationship between media & policy hostility, psycho-social dimensions (impact mental health and wellbeing) and implications for artistic responses. **[Media Communication and Social/Public Policy]**
- **how the artistic responses/practices –**
 - ✓ help refugees to cope with their psycho-social trauma or contribute to their mental health and wellbeing **[Refugee ‘agency’ & Creative Health]**
 - ✓ refugees’ citizenship-forming (belonging, identity, participation and integration or inclusion, particular cultural integration)
 - ✓ facilitate claims-making for a right to seek asylum, recognition for their cultural/ethnic identities, practices and aspirations (Tully 1995; Burgess *et al.*, 2006; Nordberg, 2006; IMISCOE 2008) **[Refugee ‘agency’, ‘Artivism’ and advocacy, cultural citizenship]**
 - ✓ are spaces for refugees’ self-representations and identity preferences i.e. how refugees represent themselves in these activities

Research Gaps



- ✓ enable citizenship-forming (feelings of belonging and transnational identities) among the offspring of refugees [**intergenerational dimension**]
 - ✓ contribution to changing ‘hearts and minds’ or canvassing public support
- I met Isha during a project for last year's Refugee Week, a play called **The Flats**. I remember the first time I met the group of asylum seekers, I had racist views. Isha said to me that as I get to know them my attitude will change. I didn't think so, but I decided to give myself a chance. And I did change. [Anne Marie, 38, – **The Daily Record, Nov. 2008**]*
- what is the role of the contemporary refugee art(ist) in advancing creative health and wellbeing by and among refugees?