'Migration Songs': A Community Music Project for Hearing Migrant Voices

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Abstract:
Within the migration narrative, the voices and stories from individuals who have experienced forced displacement are often absent. This article explores employing community music as a means for hearing and including these voices, as well as the importance of creating safe spaces where asylum seekers can share their stories and participate in the creative process. *Participation* is discussed as a fundamental human right put forward by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations 1948) and the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UCDC) (UNESCO 2001). Participation becomes especially vital for people existing in liminal spaces in society; for example, asylum seekers. I introduce a participatory community music project I co-created called "Migration Songs," which took place between January 2017 and March 2020 in Brussels, Belgium. During this time, I offered weekly poetry and songwriting sessions for asylum seekers at the Fedasil Arrival Centre with poet and writer, Sarah Reader Harris. Together, we employed poetry and a participatory method of songwriting called Story-to-Song to work with residents of the centre to step into the role of artist and musician, writing music from their migration stories. Participant reactions to the project, as well as methods I have employed for sharing the songs with a larger audience are shared. Further questions for consideration include how to bring the songs and the stories into the migration narrative and how to share them with audiences that are resistant to hearing migrant voices.

Keywords: Community Music; participation; sustainability; migration; asylum seeker; songwriting; poetry; participatory art.

In this article, I describe how community music can welcome, include, and facilitate participation, especially for asylum seekers. I situate my research within the field of community music, introducing a participatory method of songwriting I co-created that can develop opportunities for 'self-sustainability' for participants. I discuss *participation* as a fundamental human right put forward by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations 1948) and the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UCDC) (UNESCO 2001). I focus on the right to participate in the context of the experience of asylum seekers in Belgium specifically, situating participation through the lens of communication to bring these voices—which are underrepresented and often absent—into larger migration narratives. I suggest that it takes intention to create the space to hear migrant voices and that the arts can be employed to achieve this end. Finally, I present a project I co-created at the Fedasil Arrival Centre in Brussels to facilitate participation for asylum seekers through poetry, story, and song. This project represents one way in which artists can, with intention, welcome and celebrate diversity, create a platform for hearing absent voices, and create opportunities for agency, empowerment and internal asylum for participants. As the participants with whom I worked were in the process of applying for asylum in Belgium, I use the term *asylum seeker* when writing about my research.

Community Music
I situate my approach in part within the definition of community music put forward by Higgins (2012), who positions 'the growth of community arts as a resistance to institutionalized arts teaching and learning' (24). Community musicians have often existed in their own liminal space in the society, a place between the more formally recognized professions and institutions where accepted music making takes place (Higgins 2012). They are 'boundary-walkers' (Kushner et al., 2001), working in spaces where music is often absent. De Quadros and Amrein (2022) bring music to prisons, homeless shelters, and refugee shelters through an approach called 'Empowering Song'. In my work, I have also been inspired to bring music to places where it is absent, working with individuals who tend to not consider themselves to be musicians or composers. Facilitating people

to step into these identities can be empowering and can shift self-perception, confidence, and help to soothe the nervous system in times of distress (e.g. for displaced people seeking asylum).

The community musician, from their place on the periphery, has 'the space to challenge dominant forms and practice' (Higgins 2012: 6). I would add that this challenge is not limited to the music profession and institutions but also more broadly to praxis and policy for other boundary-walkers in society. In my work, I engage with individuals who have crossed boundaries in search of asylum and yet who remain on the outside of society, waiting for their asylum application review to be complete so they can fully participate in a new place.

My research responds to the call to action from scholars within several of these disciplines to bring first-hand accounts from those who have experienced forced displacement into the migration narrative. For example, O'Neill (2019): 'As researchers, scholars and artists, we cannot stand by, we must contribute and challenge through rigorous social research and a commitment to social justice' (143). I agree with O'Neill, that 'participatory arts-based methods guided by the need to address oppression, inequality and domination in pursuit of social justice will contribute to changing the conditions in which we produce and circulate knowledge' (143).

My work is also inspired by Lenette (2019), who employs arts-based research methods to create safe spaces for the co-creation of knowledge in partnership with migrant voices, particularly those of women. In describing a project in Australia, Lenette (2019) notes how music could be 'the common ground, bringing (seemingly) vastly different groups of people together, rather than dividing them' (182). To further situate my work within the field of participatory art and community music, I will briefly discuss my previous doctoral research in Sustainability Education.

Sustainability and Songwriting from Stories
While studying Sustainability Education, I created the concept of 'self-sustainability,' the idea that building sustainability at the global level requires beginning with the individual (Slovin 2013). In my research, I explored the beneficial effects of participatory art on the individual—myself and participants in case studies—as well as the effects on audiences witnessing the process at a demonstration (e.g. at a conference or symposium) and listening to the finished songs. I found that engaging in a creative process allowed me to restore balance to my nervous system when my equilibrium was shaken by variables beyond my control.

This experience contributed to an increase in self-sustainability, which I currently define as the practice of an individual human system to identify and embody what they need to experience balance and wellbeing in their own life. The pursuit of these needs must not inhibit any other system, human and beyond, from attaining balance and wellbeing. Within the framework of self-sustainability, practices are derived that allow an individual to return to a place of equilibrium when events within or beyond their control cause their system to become out of balance. The pursuit of sustainability at the individual level is an ongoing process, in no small part because there are so many events that occur in life that are beyond human control and that can serve to create imbalance.

I also studied how a person could experience 'a moment of sustainability' (AMOS) by participating in the process of shaping a personal story into a song. I worked closely with a colleague in the program to develop a method of songwriting called 'Story-to-Song' (STS) (Slovin 2022). Through STS, lyrics and verses are drawn as much as possible from the words of the story. The chorus, which is repeated between verses, communicates an element of the human experience that is considered universal—unrequited love, wanting to belong, wanting to see the good in people, etc. As these are experiences that many people recognize in their own lives, a universal message makes the song relatable to a broad audience and creates the opportunity for the listener to experience

empathy and solidarity with the person whose story is being communicated in the song. They may not have experienced displacement, but they can relate to the feeling of being in a new place. The melody is derived from participants singing words and phrases. I make suggestions involving wording, cadence, and melody. I bring my experience, intuition, and expertise as a musician to guide—rather than prescribe—for the final song to feel to the participant as an authentic representation of their story (Slovin 2022).

STS illuminates the experiences of individuals from different walks of life and can transcend limitations of culture, language, religion and politics. This method challenges traditional perceptions of how both knowledge and art are created, by and for whom. Within the migration narrative, STS creates opportunities for re-telling, re-humanizing, agency, empowerment, catharsis, and dignity.

I hesitate to label myself as any single identity—community musician, teaching artist, songwriter—to stay open to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) of different forms of expression, including visual art and poetry. In this way, I hope to be more inclusive of people who learn and participate differently. I consider myself to be a boundary walker, operating outside of traditional institutions and drawing from many approaches to music. My work intersects many disciplines, including community music, music education, sustainability education, arts-based research, narrative inquiry, and refugee and migration studies. Just as the process is meant to include all voices, there is no limit to artforms and creative ideas that might help to draw people in to participate.

The Right to Participate

Participation is a foundational element of participatory art, community music, and my work in sustainability and songwriting. There is a precedent regarding participation as a fundamental human right. It is supported and promoted by both the UDHR (United Nations 1948) and the UDHR (UNESCO 2001), where it has been described as both beneficial for the individual and for society. Within both declarations, there is a recurring theme of participation through the communication of a person's culture in their chosen or preferred language, which resonates with a rising recognition of the imperative to include the voices of people who are limited in their capacity to participate.

Article 19 of the UDHR (United Nations 1948), states: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers' (para. 35). Article 27 states: 'Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits' (para. 52).

The UCDC (UNESCO, 2001) begins with articles that promote participation, creativity, and cultural exchange. Article 1 recognizes the importance of cultural diversity 'for the benefit of present and future generations' (para. 12). Article 2 notes that 'Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace' (para. 13). Article 5 focuses in part on a person's freedom to 'to express themselves' (para. 16) in the language of their choice. Article 7 notes the benefits of cultural interaction: 'Creation…flourishes in contact with other cultures…can foster creativity' and 'inspire genuine dialogue among cultures' (para. 18).

The Right to Narrate

I view personal expression as a means of participation through narration. Just as every person has the right to participate, so too does every person have the right to narrate their story. Said's 1984 publication titled 'Permission to narrate' was written from the perspective of the Palestinian people, whose stories have largely been told by those who are not of Palestinian origin. Khalidi (2020)

expanded on Said's words, describing 'the right [of Palestinians] to tell their story themselves, taking back control of it' (115).

Said and Khalidi are cited here in recognition of current events in the Middle East and in the context of a migration narrative, which is often composed of people who have not experienced displacement. Said's and Khalidi's messages promote the fundamental human right for every person to be the author of their story. In the words of Negash (Negash in Cantalupo et al. 2005), 'What do I have to say? I already have a story, that nobody knows and it's great – I am the story' (79).

People are storied beings. In a case study I developed with asylum seekers in Belgium, I witnessed the power of language to give shape to the human experience in story, poetry, and song. One participant wrote the words, 'Everyone has a story.' In the words of McAdams et al. (2006), 'We are all storytellers, and we are the stories we tell' (3). People share stories to make sense of themselves, their life experiences, and the world around them. Language is an integral means of communicating these stories.

Hamelink and Hagan (2020) note, 'Speech, then, is essential in conjunction with action for the clear definition of one's self to the other' (373). Stories originate from life experiences and are often communicated through spoken word. The words people choose to narrate their life experiences can uplift, empower, diminish, and limit. They can present different ways of thinking about themselves and their experiences, both on an individual level and in the context of larger societal narratives.

Migration Narratives

Narratives are comprised of people's individual stories and the stories people tell about one another. When taken together, stories can create larger narratives about people, events, and trends in our society. These larger narratives can serve to inform and unite and to stigmatize and other.[i]

Within the European Union, narratives have evolved around migration. These narratives are often dehumanizing and serve to perpetuate fear and othering. The rise in migration in Europe since 2015 has been described as a 'crisis' (Hamelink & Hagan 2020: 372; Leurs et al., 2020). 'Rather than viewed as people potentially deserving of European protection, new arrivals are increasingly scrutinised and suspected, often also inadvertently fuelling suspicion of established migrant groups' (Hamelink & Hagan 2020: 372). Perhaps, if new arrivals were invited to share first-person accounts of their experiences they would no longer be seen as a threat or danger but as people deserving asylum.

'If the host society's imagination is littered with stereotypes of the migrant, then the establishment of a unified society is difficult to achieve' (Hamelink & Hagan 2020: 380). Leurs et al. (2020) propose an expansion beyond the limited actors giving voice to migration. Their work in the realm of media and migration explores narratives put forward by 'four groups of stakeholders: (1) migrants, (2) media professionals, (3) governments and corporations and (4) artists' (683). Even within an expanding perspective on migration narratives, they suggest that there remains 'a pressing need for more realistic, re-humanizing migrant narratives that account for individual trajectories and complex histories' (687). Participation—for migrant voices—can be a means for rewriting these narratives and can create opportunities for empathy, solidarity, and understanding.

Absent Voices

The migration narrative is often told from the perspective of those who have not experienced forced displacement. Migrant voices are largely absent. Language within this narrative can influence how the public views migrants. Quotes from politicians and international media often portray 'refugees

and migrants as a faceless, voiceless flood of numbers' (Nikunen 2020: 415). Malkki (1996) describes this propensity of not including first-person accounts from refugees and migrants as a way of silencing them. O'Neill (2019) conducts research in the participatory arts and social action research, working with migrant women to transcend barriers and stigma in the UK. 'Asylum seekers, refugees and migrants are often represented in the mainstream media as nameless and usually by others, never themselves, and this creates a space for 'othering' and the withdrawal of humanizing practice' (134).

This narrative often characterizes migrants as dangerous and suggests that they take resources away from people with citizen status in the country. Including the voices of migrants could create alternative perspectives, with the arrival of newcomers as an opportunity for cultural exchange, diversity, knowledge, and ideas. For example, consider Snell (2016), who conducted an interview with a refugee living in a migrant camp in Calais, France called 'The Jungle,' which no longer exists. The interviewee shared the following perspective: 'We are not dangerous. We are in danger' (para. 7).

O'Neill (2011) writes, 'It is vital to keep open spaces for resistance, dialogue and debate on these crucial issues, and to include the very people situated in the asylum–migration nexus in discussion, debate and research' (14). Including the voices of those most acutely affected by migration brings authenticity to the narrative. First-person accounts raise awareness of the migration experience. A shift in perception of migration and migrants could occur with better representation of their experiences. Both migrants living in makeshift camps and those required to live in centres prior to being granted asylum exist in a liminal space in society, separate from citizens. Residents who have not interacted with asylum seekers may shift their perspective if the first-person voices are included in media reports and with opportunities for cultural exchange. I witnessed this at events I helped to organize for asylum seekers and residents of Belgium to share poetry and music; a discussion of these findings is beyond the scope of this article.

Including Voices from the Periphery
From a DEI standpoint, asylum seekers have a right to be included in a narrative that is not only about them but has consequences for how they are viewed. A phrase is used in the context of accessibility for individuals with disabilities: 'Nothing about us without us' (Charlton 1998). This phrase is also used in the context of participatory art, and it is appropriate to use in the context of refugee stories.

The declarations on human rights and cultural diversity recognize the need to welcome and include the voices of all people for society to flourish. However, participation can be challenging for people in a liminal space within society. How do people from the periphery of society participate? How can their voices be heard?

Communication is an essential method for asserting one's identity and place in the world. Communication rights stand for empowerment, recognition of agency, respect for dignity and communicative freedom. 'An inability to communicate poses a fundamental threat to the human being in social relations with others and is an act that requires protection and facilitation' (Hamelink & Hagan 2020: 373). Creating opportunities and space for people to communicate is one method for hearing voices that have been absent.

While there is global recognition and support for the benefits of communication, participation, freedom of expression and language, and cultural diversity as ways of unifying and strengthening society, there are no actual 'provisions for communication and information' for migrants in international law (Hamelink & Hagan 2020: 376). Language itself can be a limiting factor,

particularly for those individuals (e.g., asylum seekers) whose voices are already marginalized and who may not speak the predominantly used language when arriving at a new place.

O'Neill (2011) writes of the need for 'creating spaces for people to speak for themselves as subjects and objects of their narratives, without an intermediary speaking on their behalf' (31-32). The arts can be a way to achieve this end, as put forward by Leurs et al. (2020), who recommend 'bringing out narratives of migrants themselves…through participatory or co-creation artistic, activist and research projects' (690). Including absent voices in the migration narrative through the arts requires an intentional movement to create spaces where they can be heard, recorded, and subsequently shared.

Artists can facilitate participation through community arts programs, which can be especially powerful for people existing in the liminal spaces within society. Just as 'art' is included within the word 'article,' there is a place for art within the context of declarations mentioned above. Interpreting Article 7 through the lens of community arts, the word 'creation' can be employed in the context of artist creation. 'Creation draws on the roots of cultural tradition, but flourishes in contact with other cultures.' Art can 'foster creativity in all its diversity and to inspire genuine dialogue among cultures' as Article 7 denotes. In addition, Article 27 inspired the name of the European arts network organization Art27.

'Art promotes cultural diversity and equality of opportunity' (Higgins 2012: 16). Under the assumption that participation in art is a human right and that a person has the right to participate in their preferred language, how can artists design programs to be accessible when there is no common language among participants? I believe the field of community music offers one solution.

Migration Songs: Facilitating Participation in Belgium
My songwriting process has evolved over time. From my initial doctoral research, working with participants one-on-one, I have expanded the process to include songwriting with groups of people. I intentionally bring music into 'in between' spaces and use art to foster participation, communication in all languages, and create a sense of welcome, connection, and community. I place a strong emphasis on the process of creating a safe, equitable space for participants to share their stories and collaboratively compose a song that honours all voices and experiences. This process involves a shared agency in the decision-making process and co-created knowledge that culminates in a finished song. The artform requires working with each person's comfort level.

I had the privilege of co-creating a case study that came to be called 'Migration Songs' during my time at the Fedasil Arrival Centre in Brussels. The Fedasil Arrival Centre is itself a liminal or 'in between' space where asylum seekers exist, waiting for a response to their asylum application. Having left their home country and arrived in Belgium, they were also physically in a new place but not yet able to fully participate as they await a response to their asylum application.

Together with my co-volunteer, poet and writer Sarah Reader Harris, we employed poetry and songwriting for two hours on Monday afternoons from January 2017 through March 2020. We invited participants to compose poetry and songwriting from their migration stories. We worked with one to 15 participants each week, culminating in hundreds of contacts over the course of three years. Data was collected in the form of voice memo audio recordings of stories and stages of the songwriting process, verbal and written stories shared by participants, personal communications from participants about their experiences, and follow up communications sent by email, WhatsApp text, and social media messenger apps. The finished songs were introduced at events that brought together the participants and other artists living in Brussels. we also worked with participants and

people from a community of migrant artists in Brussels to produce a book called 'On the Move: Poems and Songs of Migration,' which highlighted 27 of the finished songs (Lewis et al. 2020).

The Project in Practice
When I met Sarah, she had been offering weekly poetry sessions for many years. Her setup was a large piece of paper taped to a wall along a covered corridor overlooking an open courtyard through which people passed on their way into the centre after going through security. She brought markers and poetry books and would often write a line or stanza from a poem to inspire ideas from participants and to make the blank page less intimidating.

We continued to use this method, incorporating elements from STS to shape the lines of prose people wrote into a song we could sing together. Participants were invited to share words, phrases, and stories in the language of their choice. We would often engage in dialogue, sharing stories, hopes, and fears around people's migration journeys and experiences. For asylum seekers, language is one limiting factor in participation. To understand the words being communicated, we depended on a combination of translation and interpretation, which was possible through the languages spoken by the people present, Google Translate, gesticulations, and visual imagery. The songs were created collaboratively, and we would regularly check in with participants to ensure each person felt that their contributions were being equitably and honourably included and interpreted.

The number of contributors to a song depended on how many people joined us on a given afternoon. There were songs written with one participant from a single story in one language and songs comprised of several stories in many languages. We followed a general structure of inviting people to first speak and write their ideas. Sometimes, people would ask us to write their words as they spoke. We would then discuss the ideas or messages people wished to communicate in the song. We would take turns pointing out possible ways the words and stanzas could be organized, writing numbers to organize the flow of information and sometimes drawing arrows from one line to another. The next step would be to post a new page and write everything out so it could be seen all together and with more clarity. Then we would invite participants to sing some or all the words to start to look for a beginning melody. If no one wanted to sing, I would volunteer. This was a way to draw people into the decision-making process. People might tell me if the melody I was singing was not the right fit. They could then offer an alternative, which we would build on. For my part, I would determine the key they were singing in and offer possible chords to support the notes.

'Participatory arts-based methods guided by the need to address oppression, inequality and domination in pursuit of social justice will contribute to changing the conditions in which we produce and circulate knowledge' (O'Neill 2019: 143). My intention was to promote equity, social justice, and democratic co-creation of knowledge. To be transparent, I will note that I was, at times, following a western structure for song composition. I am trained in western classical and folk music traditions, and this was my lens and foundation for music making. I recognized the colonial bias I brought to the process and the fact that many of the people we worked with came from cultures with different traditions for music making. I worked to expand beyond my own lens to be able to hear other possibilities through the words, melodies and rhythms shared by the participants. In this way, many of the songs did not adhere to a western, colonial format, following the song structure that evolved through the co-creation of the participants present at each session.

Another goal was to have something to sing together at the end of each weekly session. We might chant the same phrase in several languages or have a longer, more finished song. To encourage participants to identify as musicians, I began bringing a bag of handheld rhythm instruments that people could choose from. I offered additional musical accompaniment on a baritone ukulele. There

was a feeling of connection and community as the group came together to perform the song we co-created.

The Art of Welcome: Exclusion is not the Solution/Music in Liminal Spaces

There is a phrase painted on a bridge by the refugee centre, which reads in French 'Exclusion n'est pas une solution.' This translates as 'Exclusion is not a solution.' I have largely shifted the focus of my approach to community music to encompass a practice of inclusion, what I refer to as 'the art of welcome.' I work to celebrate diversity and participation through poetry, story, and song. I engage with people whose voices are already absent from society, and so I wish to honour voices within the voices. 'I want to listen to the hidden voices and attend to them' (Birch 2022: 159). De Quadros (2011) states that music-making projects can facilitate self-empowerment 'because every act of expression is an act of authorship and self-affirmation' (67). I have experienced a shift in self-perception toward empowerment through this creative process. Often at the start, people expressed doubt in having a story that is 'interesting enough' to become a song. They told us they did not have a beautiful voice. However, at the end of a session when they were singing a song from their own story, more often than not there was an expression of delight, confidence, and excitement. Participants often called friends and family on video to share the song with them and introduce them to us.

Lenette (2019) notes, 'using arts-based methods collaboratively and ethically in refugee studies can offer sanctuary from the complications and stresses of everyday life. This sense of sanctuary can counter damaging impacts of immigration and refugee policy across the world' (xi). Participants in our study communicated relief from stress and feeling more human. Higgins (2016) writes about the role of justice for what he refers to as 'hospitable music making.' In our work composing poetry and music with refugees and asylum seekers in Belgium, one of our goals was to create a space of welcome, inspired by a quote attributed to John Updike: 'What art offers is space—a certain breathing room for the spirit' (Demakis 2012: 23).

I consider this breathing room to be an integral component for creating self-sustainability and moments of sustainability. Participants could feel welcome and safe to talk about their migration journeys, their hopes and dreams, fears and worries. Participants responded positively to this approach. One resident communicated an alleviation of stress just from listening to the music we co-created. We wrote a song with a young man from Yemen called 'Give me a Chance.' He told us the process allowed him to communicate his desire to be seen as a person who wanted to give and contribute to Belgian society as opposed to a refugee, taking resources and being seen as a burden.

Art itself and the creative process take place in a kind of liminal space. O'Neill (2008) referred to the 'hyphen' or 'potential space' (4) that art creates, moments and windows of possibility for transformation and creativity. I experienced the space for 'potential' and possibility regarding creativity, art, connection, cultural exchange, and community. It was not solely the creation of art, but also the creation of connection and community that were a powerful result of the practice.

This study demonstrates that it is possible to create a feeling of connection and community within a short time, even one that is transitory. We started as strangers and left with a bond and a new understanding, seeing and hearing one another. Many participants have kept in touch with us, which supports the notion that even if the community element was of a liminal, temporary nature, the lived experience and sense of connection and meaningfulness from the shared moment can endure.

It takes intention to create the space to foster this cultural connection and exchange through participatory art. The practice of participatory art can empower and help people to reclaim agency. In this way, even within the uncertain realm of the life of a refugee, art can create self-

sustainability, moments of sustainability, and an internal asylum. Perhaps not asylum in the traditional sense, but an asylum for the soul.

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[i] This is a term used in the United States that refers to actions that stigmatize people who are different and are thus considered "others". Othering a person dehumanizes them and strips them of their humanity (Jensen 2011).