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Exploring Arts, Culture, and Migration: A Multidisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Challenge in Global Migration Studies

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Abstract

The paper embarks on an exploration of the profound significance of examining the intricate relationships between migration, the arts, and cultural expression. It argues that such an inquiry is essential for grasping the deeper currents that shape both individual and collective experiences of displacement. By tracing the interwoven threads of artistic creation and migratory movement, the study seeks to illuminate the transformative power of culture in the context of migration. Following this, the discussion turns to the most promising methodological approaches that can render such research both insightful and fruitful. The paper considers various analytical frameworks, emphasizing those that capture the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural exchange. It advocates for methods that do justice to the complexities of migration, highlighting the necessity of interdisciplinary perspectives that bridge the humanities and social sciences.

Keywords: migration, cultural expression, displacement, cultural exchange, migratory movement.

Introduction

The intricate connections between the arts, culture, and migration have long been the subject of inquiry within cultural studies and the humanities. Yet, despite their richness, these intersections have remained largely overlooked within the expanding field of migration studies in Europe. Historically, the discourse surrounding migration has been shaped by disciplines such as demography, sociology, and political science, leaving little room for an exploration of its cultural dimensions (Martiniello, 2015).

This neglect stems from the dominant perspectives on migration and migrants that have prevailed since the end of the Second World War. For decades, migration was viewed primarily as an economic phenomenon, a transient response to labor demands. Migrants themselves were seen chiefly as workers, valued for their role in production rather than as individuals with artistic or cultural identities. As Sayad (1991) observes, their legitimacy was defined solely by their labor—by their capacity to contribute to the economy. Within this framework, their cultural engagements, artistic expressions, and participation in the arts were largely disregarded. The prevailing assumption was that migrants existed to work, not to create or consume culture.

Moreover, since many migrants came from economically disadvantaged regions, often with limited formal education, the idea that they might possess artistic sensibilities or creative aspirations was seldom entertained. This disregard was further reinforced by a broader tendency within social sciences and policy discourse to marginalize arts and culture. In sociology, for instance, the study of arts and culture is frequently dismissed as a minor field, relegated to the periphery of academic inquiry.



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With the gradual realization that migration was not a fleeting occurrence but a fundamental and enduring phenomenon, the question of integration emerged as a central concern—both in policymaking and academic discourse. Culture, understood in its anthropological breadth, became a contested lens through which the challenges of integration were interpreted. Fierce debates arose between those who framed integration through a "culturalist" perspective and those who emphasized its structural and institutional dimensions, highlighting systemic exclusion and discrimination (Martens, 1975).

Yet, it was only in the latter half of the 2000s that the intricate relationships between migration, the arts, and the cultural expressions of migrants and their descendants began to draw sustained scholarly attention across Europe. In this shift, the European research network IMISCOE [International Migration Research Network] played a pioneering role, striving to unite migration scholars with an interest in arts and culture and to carve out new avenues of research.

From its inception in 2004, IMISCOE's research agenda included a cluster on "Ethnic, Cultural, and Religious Diversity," led by Steven Vertovec. A significant stream within this cluster, helmed by Marco Martiniello, focused on "Ethnic Minorities' and Immigrants' Cultural Productions as Forms of Political Expression." Its inaugural publication, a special issue of the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008), examined the interplay between arts, culture, and politics in migration studies from an international and multidisciplinary standpoint. This collection showcased the political significance of migrant artistic and cultural practices across diverse domains, including music, literature, radio, nightlife, dance, visual arts, and theatre. Scholars working at the intersection of arts, ethnicity, and migration found within IMISCOE a collaborative space to exchange ideas and expand their research.

As IMISCOE evolved, research clusters were replaced by standing committees. In 2010, the POPADIVCIT [Popular Art, Diversity, and Cultural Policies in Post-Migration Urban Settings] committee was founded under the guidance of Martiniello, Wiebke Sievers, and Ricard Zapata, reflecting a growing scholarly interest in the cultural dimensions of migration. This interest extended beyond IMISCOE, as seen in the 2014 volume Immigration and the New Urban Landscape in New York and Amsterdam (Foner et al., eds.), which devoted two chapters to the cultural impact of second-generation immigrants in these cities. In this work, Kasinitz (2014) put forth the "Second-Generation Advantage" hypothesis for New York City, while Sawitri Saharso, in collaboration with POPADIVCIT members Christine Delhaye and Victor van de Ven (2014), examined the role of immigrant youth in shaping urban culture in Amsterdam. During this period, connections were also forged with scholars outside IMISCOE, leading to the publication of two special issues (Martiniello, 2014; Zapata et al., 2017). In 2019, a restructuring of IMISCOE replaced POPADIVCIT with DIVCULT [Superdiversity, Migration, and Cultural Change], helmed by Martiniello and Sievers. DIVCULT expanded upon the work of its predecessor in three key ways: first, by broadening its scope beyond music, literature, cinema, and theatre to encompass other artistic expressions and cultural domains, including fashion, design, food, and leisure; second, by deepening its multidisciplinary approach to include economists and legal scholars alongside sociologists, anthropologists, cultural theorists, and political scientists; and third, by advancing methodological innovation, particularly in visual studies and participatory arts-based research. The constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic further propelled researchers to develop online methodologies, compensating for the impossibility of traditional fieldwork during lockdowns.

Guided by the principles of DIVCULT, this article seeks to address two fundamental questions that frequently arise in discussions of our research. First, it examines the importance of studying the relationships between migration, the arts, and cultural expression, questioning what unique insights such



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inquiries contribute to the field of ethnic and migration studies. Second, it explores the methodological approaches best suited to capturing the multifaceted interplay of arts, culture, and migration. These themes are also explored in this special issue by Wiebke Sievers, who offers a distinct perspective informed by her own disciplinary background.

Why is it essential to explore the connections between migration, arts, and culture?

At first glance, delving into the intricate connections between migration, the arts, and cultural expression may seem like a futile endeavor, particularly for two pressing reasons. First, over the past two decades—and with heightened urgency since the 2015 refugee crisis (Rea et al., 2019)—academic discourse has been dominated by two major concerns: the mounting number of migrants who lose their lives attempting to reach Europe due to increasingly restrictive migration policies, and the inhumane conditions endured by asylum seekers in overcrowded encampments, from Lesvos at Europe's borders to Calais at its heart. The harrowing human consequences of migration and asylum policies have justifiably remained at the forefront of research, leading some to argue that studying the intersections of art and migration while people perish at sea or suffer in camps is not only irrelevant but perhaps even morally questionable. Second, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, artistic and cultural activities ground to a near halt, making it seem an inopportune moment to investigate their relationship with migration.

Despite these arguments, I contend that exploring these intersections is more vital than ever. While the pandemic inflicted severe hardships on the cultural sector, its complete cessation was brief. In an ethnographic study of cultural participation in five districts of Brussels' canal zone, it was observed that, after an initial standstill, artists and socio-cultural workers devised innovative ways to continue their practices—whether online or outdoors. These efforts played a crucial role in alleviating social isolation and fostering solidarity among residents, both migrants and non-migrants alike (Mescoli & Martiniello, 2021).

Additionally, since March 2020, migration and asylum have been eclipsed by the pandemic as the dominant issue in European political and media discourse. Migrants and refugees have been largely overlooked in the management of the global health crisis, exacerbating their vulnerability and hardship. Local solidarity initiatives were hindered by the very measures imposed to curb the virus's spread (Martiniello & Mazzola, 2020). On one hand, migrants already within Europe found themselves trapped in a state of forced immobility, surviving on the margins of society with limited rights. On the other, restricted legal migration pathways pushed many asylum seekers and migrants to undertake increasingly perilous journeys, such as the treacherous sea route between Senegal and the Canary Islands. The pandemic did not halt the migrant reception crisis, nor did it eliminate the deep-seated social, economic, and political drivers of migration.

In such a fraught socio-political climate, how does art serve as a medium for narrating migration and the lived experiences of migrants? Is there, indeed, an art to speaking of migration? The following case studies, drawn from my research, offer tangible answers to these questions, illustrating the indispensable role of artistic expression in migration studies.

The first case centers on *Taaw*, a Senegalese painter and visual artist based in Brussels. Having lived in Germany and France before settling in Belgium, *Taaw* is the son of a filmmaker and a keen observer of African societies, particularly his native Senegal. Our paths crossed serendipitously during the second lockdown in 2020 when a mutual acquaintance shared images of *Taaw's* paintings, which he was attempting to sell amidst the near-total shutdown of the cultural sector. Galleries were closed, exhibitions



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suspended, yet financial obligations remained. Seeking alternative avenues, *Taaw* turned to social media in hopes of finding buyers.

As a migration sociologist, I was immediately struck by the vivid, dynamic quality of his work, which powerfully captured the realities of migration. This unexpected introduction led to a deeply enriching exchange—one that took place in my open garage to comply with health regulations. There, a conversation unfolded between two individuals: a Senegalese artist and an Italian-Belgian sociologist, each carrying their own migration histories, each deeply engaged with the subject of migration and human rights, and both acutely aware of the stark inequalities that define our world.

Our discussion touched on the hardships of life in these uncertain times, as well as the themes of migration that *Taaw* sought to depict through his art. When I shared insights from my research, he responded with a simple yet profound statement: "I write with my painting." Indeed, his art narrates the often-tragic, yet deeply human, odyssey of young Senegalese migrants—some paintings depict the meticulous preparations for departure, while others evoke the perilous journey across the sea in fragile boats. Through color and composition, *Taaw* tells a migration story that is raw, compelling, and unflinching.

The second case study examines the work of an action-theatre company in the Liège region of Belgium, which similarly harnesses artistic expression to engage with migration narratives (Martiniello, 2021). These examples demonstrate that, far from being an academic indulgence, the study of migration through the lens of art and culture is essential. It is through art that we can give voice to migration in ways that transcend statistics and policies—capturing the resilience, struggles, and aspirations of those who embark on these journeys.

When I first met *Taaw* in November 2020, the media had begun, albeit cautiously, to report on the resurgence of the clandestine maritime migration route between the Senegalese coast and the Canary Islands—Europe's gateway from West Africa. This tragic passage, fraught with peril, had already claimed the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of young Senegalese and other African migrants, their dreams of a European *Eldorado* dissolving into the merciless waves. *Taaw* was deeply moved by this grim reality. For him, this deadly exodus must end. He fervently believes that young people contemplating the treacherous journey must be made to understand that the *Eldorado* they seek is an illusion, and that fleeing hardship by risking death at sea is not a viable solution. As both an artist and a citizen, *Taaw* has taken it upon himself to raise awareness, both in Senegal and in Europe. He sees this mission as part of his duty—the responsibility of an elder sibling guiding the younger generation. He also believes that European governments must recognize the necessity of establishing fair, reciprocal migration policies that facilitate legal mobility between Africa and Europe for education and employment. Yet, whether this message is truly heard remains an open question. What is undeniable, however, is that his paintings serve as powerful instruments of awareness, capturing the tragedy of migration with striking honesty while preserving the dignity of its subjects.

Theatre as a Voice for Migration: En Cie du Sud

The second case study focuses on *En Cie du Sud*, an action-theatre company that intertwines historical and contemporary migration narratives through its performances. The Liège region of French-speaking Belgium, much like the mining districts of the Ruhr in Germany or Northern France, has long been shaped by migration due to its industrial heritage. Yet, unlike these other regions, Liège has remained largely resistant to the rise of far-right political movements. One contributing factor is the presence of a strong and engaged network of associations and civil society organizations. With a population of roughly



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200,000, Liège is a city of *superdiversity* (Vertovec, 2007), marked by its multicultural fabric and a long-standing tradition of antifascist activism.

French-speaking Belgium, and Liège in particular, also boasts a rich history of action-theatre, which aligns with the country's broader policies of cultural democracy and lifelong education. Since the 1970s and 1980s, theatre companies have used the stage to address migration-related themes. A striking example is the 1996 production by *Théâtre de la Renaissance de Seraing*, a theatre in a town adjacent to Liège. The play, *Hasard, Espérance et Bonne Fortune* (*Chance, Hope, and Good Fortune*), bore a seemingly cryptic title—at least for audiences unfamiliar with the region. These names, however, belong to three collieries where Italian miners first arrived in 1946 as part of a bilateral migration agreement between Belgium and Italy.

This historic agreement, often remembered as the "arms for coal deal" (Morelli, 1988), stipulated that Italy would provide Belgium with laborers to work in its mines in exchange for discounted coal exports. Italian workers were assigned to mines abandoned by Belgian laborers due to their hazardous conditions and meager wages. The agreement required them to stay in Belgium for a period of five years, extracting coal under perilous circumstances.

The play, conceived and performed by young amateur actors—many of them of Italian descent—resurrected the forgotten stories of these migrant workers. Based on meticulous historical research conducted in collaboration with historians and social scientists, the production took place on a uniquely designed stage: a railway track cutting through the performance space, evoking the arrival of immigrant workers by train. The lead roles were played by four former miners of Italian origin, who, in a poignant act of self-representation, narrated their own migration experiences. The atmosphere oscillated between moments of joy and sorrow, immersing the audience in the emotional landscape of migration.

Reviving the Past: Les Fils de Hasard, Espérance et Bonne Fortune

Two decades later, *En Cie du Sud*, under the direction of Martine De Michele—who had been part of the original production—decided to revive the play while preserving its spirit. *Les Fils de Hasard, Espérance et Bonne Fortune (The Sons of Chance, Hope, and Good Fortune)* premiered in Liège in the autumn of 2016, marking the 70th anniversary of the Belgian-Italian migration agreement. Since the original miners who had performed in the 1996 production had passed away, their roles were taken up by professional actors.

Despite the cast change, the revival remained faithful to the approach of its predecessor. The power of firsthand testimonies endured, and the performance established a striking parallel between the migration stories of the post-war era and those of today. In 2018 and 2019, pre-show exhibitions were introduced, displaying historical documents and photographs that juxtaposed past migrations with contemporary migration crises. Notably, the diversity of the cast had also evolved; no longer predominantly of Italian descent, it now included Belgian, Portuguese, and Yugoslavian actors. A young refugee from Afghanistan took on the role of an Italian migrant in the 1950s, further underscoring the universality of the migration experience.

The play traverses' themes of displacement, adaptation, labor, community relations, and the ever-present specter of loss. One of its most haunting scenes recounts the 1956 Marcinelle disaster—a catastrophic gas explosion in a Charleroi coal mine that claimed the lives of over 200 miners, the majority of them Italian. Through the evocative medium of theatre, the audience is led to draw an unspoken connection between this historical tragedy and the ongoing migrant deaths in the Mediterranean.



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Performed annually in Liège from 2016 to 2019, and again in 2021 after a pandemic-induced hiatus, the play has also toured immigration hubs such as La Louvière and Mons, reaching an audience of over 23,000. More than just a theatrical event, it has become a deeply anticipated moment in the cultural calendar. Italian-origin spectators attend in large numbers, drawn by the play's historical and commemorative significance, yet the performance is far from a nostalgic reunion. Its contemporary relevance attracts audiences keen to understand the dynamics of present-day migration. Moreover, its theatrical and aesthetic qualities draw devoted theatre-goers, for whom the production's artistic merit is as compelling as its subject matter.

The Role of Art in Migration Discourse

In 2018, 2019, and 2021, En Cie du Sud collaborated with the Centre for Ethnic and Migration Studies (CEDEM) at the University of Liège to organize post-show discussions. These forums provided spectators with a space to share their emotions, ask questions, reflect on migration's historical and contemporary dimensions, or simply engage in open dialogue. These discussions, rich and deeply personal, demonstrated that meaningful, informed conversations about migration remain possible—even in an era of heightened political tensions and media-driven stigmatization of migrants.

These two case studies illustrate not only that certain artists have mastered the art of narrating migration, but also that scholars must acknowledge and engage with these artistic expressions. Many artists, themselves migrants or descendants of migrants, draw upon lived experiences to construct narratives that resonate with authenticity and emotional depth. In doing so, they craft a discourse on migration that is often more accessible than academic texts or policy papers.

Studying the relationship between arts, culture, and migration is essential—not merely for its content but for the broader insights it offers. It reminds us that migration is not solely an economic, demographic, or political phenomenon; it is also a profoundly cultural one. Migrants are not just laborers, economic units, or statistics—they are agents of artistic and cultural transformation, shaping both their homelands and the societies in which they settle.

How can the connections between arts, culture, and migration be effectively studied?

In earlier works (Martiniello, 2015), I proposed a conceptual framework encompassing five distinct yet interconnected domains through which to analyze the intricate relationships between migration, the arts, and cultural expression.

First, at the cultural level, we suggested examining how the artistic productions of immigrant, ethnicized, and racialized artists influence and reshape local, national, and even transnational artistic and cultural landscapes. Second, at the social level, I proposed investigating the extent to which artistic expression can act as a bridge between communities, fostering encounters and connections among people of different ethnic, racial, and migratory backgrounds living within the same urban spaces (Vertovec, 2009).

Third, at the policy level, we emphasized the importance of analyzing how cultural institutions and policies respond to the increasing diversification of artistic expression. Are they evolving toward inclusivity, or do they remain exclusionary? Do migrant and minority artists receive public recognition for their cultural contributions? Fourth, at the political level, I underscored the role of arts and culture as tools for political mobilization, questioning how they might serve to challenge power imbalances in superdiverse cities and societies. Finally, at the economic level, we advocated for a closer look at the impact of immigrant and ethnic artistic production on local economies.



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Each of these five domains allows for the construction of multiple theoretical frameworks. However, rather than engaging in a purely theoretical discussion, the objective of this paper is to explore how research in this field can be advanced through multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and comparative approaches.

The Necessity of Multidisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Perspectives

Given the multifaceted nature of this research field, a strictly monodisciplinary approach would be insufficient. Instead, I argue for an explicitly multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary methodology. The study of cultural and artistic transformations linked to migration can benefit from disciplines such as cultural studies, literary studies, and anthropology. The social dimensions of artistic engagement, particularly in fostering intercultural interaction, can be explored through sociology, social psychology, and anthropology. For research on cultural policy and institutional responses, policy studies and legal studies provide valuable insights. The political mobilization of migrant and ethnic communities through art calls for the expertise of political sociology and political science, particularly within social movement studies. Finally, the economic impact of migrant artistic production can be effectively analyzed using economic and urban geography.

Beyond the mere coexistence of different disciplines, however, transdisciplinary collaboration is essential. Transdisciplinarity requires scholars to step beyond the familiar boundaries of their own disciplines, engaging with alternative perspectives and methodologies. This cross-pollination of knowledge not only enriches academic inquiry but also enables researchers to examine migration, arts, and culture from multiple vantage points simultaneously.

A concrete example of this approach is the study *Refugees for Refugees: Musicians Between Confinement and Perspectives* (Martiniello & Sechehaye, 2019), a collaboration between myself, a political sociologist specializing in migration and ethnic relations, and Hélène Sechehaye, an ethnomusicologist. The research focused on a musical project initiated by the non-profit organization Muziekpublique in Brussels, dedicated to the promotion of "world music"—a contested category. This project brought together refugee musicians from various countries who had sought asylum in Belgium.

Through this case study, we explored the complexities of creating an artistic project that simultaneously emphasized the common identity of *refugees* while celebrating their diverse musical traditions. Sechehaye's ethnomusicological perspective was crucial in demonstrating that the notion of music as a "universal language" requires deconstruction. The musicians, hailing from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tibet, and beyond, did not merely collaborate as individuals but had to navigate the intricate process of forging a shared musical language. Without Sechehaye's expertise, this fundamental aspect of the project—one that shaped both the musicians' careers and the reception of their work—might have been overlooked.

The Value of Comparative Research

In addition to transdisciplinary inquiry, comparative analysis is a valuable tool for understanding the links between migration, arts, and culture. In a previous study on comparative methods in migration research (Martiniello, 2013), I outlined three key modes of comparison:

 Comparing people – In a study on political mobilization through music among second- and thirdgeneration immigrants in Liège, I compared two distinct multicultural groups: a rap collective and a group of football *ultras*, both of whom used rap as a means of political expression, identity construction, and protest (Martiniello, 2020).



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- 2. Comparing places Aksoy (2020) analyzed the music of Alevi immigrants from Turkey in the German cities of Cologne and Wuppertal, offering insights into how location influences cultural expression and identity formation.
- 3. Comparing historical periods It would be instructive, for example, to compare the role of arts in the political mobilization of second- and third-generation immigrants in the European Union during the 1970s and 1980s with its function in contemporary movements such as Black Lives Matter, where cultural expression plays a central role.

Additionally, comparisons between different artistic disciplines—such as music, theatre, literature, and visual arts—can further enhance our understanding of how art serves as a vehicle for migrant political mobilization. While specialized studies of individual art forms are valuable, a cross-disciplinary comparison offers a broader perspective, making it possible to identify overarching patterns and influences.

Reflexivity, Positionality, and Ethical Considerations

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of reflexivity and positionality in research, as well as the potential pitfalls in the construction and reproduction of analytical categories. Given that this field often involves studying artistic processes within marginalized, stigmatized, or even dehumanized communities, scholars must exercise heightened ethical sensitivity. Several key questions must be addressed:

- How does the researcher's presence in the field influence the self-perception of the artists and cultural actors being studied?
- More broadly, what impact does academic research have on the lives of the individuals and communities it seeks to understand?
- To what extent does research risk unwittingly reproducing the very categories of stigmatization that dominate migration discourse?
- How can scholars avoid appropriating the voices of the people they interview, ensuring that research does not become an act of speaking *for* rather than *with*?
- Finally, how does engagement with this research shape the researcher's own identity, perspective, and social position?

These are questions that should be integral to any social science research project. While they are beyond the scope of this article to address in full, they serve as an essential reminder that the study of migration, arts, and culture is not merely an academic pursuit but one with profound social and political implications. In the two case studies explored in this article, my personal history played a significant role—not only in gaining access to the field but also in shaping the nature of my collaboration with *Taaw* and the theatre company *En Cie du Sud*. My own journey is deeply intertwined with the broader narratives of migration and labor.

Conclusion

In this paper, the paper asserts that the true value of these investigations lies not only in fostering a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of migration but also in reshaping the prevailing discourse surrounding migrants. Rather than reducing them to passive subjects of hardship, this research seeks to counteract narratives of victimization by restoring their agency and humanity. Through the lens of artistic and cultural expression, migrants emerge not as mere figures of suffering but as creators, storytellers, and active participants in shaping their own identities. In doing so, the study aspires to "rehumanize" migration, offering a perspective that recognizes the resilience, creativity, and lived experiences of those



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who journey across borders.

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