



# Traces: Stories of Migration

A Qualitative Research Report on  
Visual Arts-Led Textile Practices  
in Collaboration with Migrant  
Communities in East London

Authors  
Natasha Fulton  
Lucy Orta



“Paradoxically, our cultural identities, in any finished form, lie ahead of us. We are always in the process of cultural formation. Culture is not a matter of ontology of being, but of becoming.”

– *Stuart Hall*

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review</b>
7	2.1 Migration Within The UK
9	2.2 Migration Challenges
12	2.3 Arts Engagement
15	<i>Traces: Stories of Migration</i>
<b>17</b>	<b>Chapter 3: The Study Aims</b>
<b>19</b>	<b>Chapter 4: Method</b>
20	4.1 Participant Interviews
20	4.2 Materials and Research Design
20	4.3 Procedure
21	4.4 Data Analysis
21	4.5 Reflexivity
<b>22</b>	<b>Chapter 5: Results and Discussion</b>
<b>34</b>	<b>Chapter 6: Conclusions</b>
38	Outcomes and Impact of <i>Traces: Stories of Migration</i>
<b>39</b>	<b>References</b>

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. The Study Aims
4. Method
5. Results and Discussion
6. Conclusions  
References

# Introduction

1

Human migration is an enduring facet of our existence, exerting a profound impact in shaping the cultural tapestry of nations and their global connections. Migration has played a pivotal role in the United Kingdom, helping foster economic prosperity, augmenting the public service workforce, and enriching the cultural tapestry of the nation.

Despite its profound contributions and historical significance, recent years have witnessed migration evolve into a sensitive and charged topic within the UK, shaping political discourse, and influencing public sentiment (Burnett, 2017). The 2016 UK Brexit vote serves as a prominent example of this growing anti-migration rhetoric and ideology (Goodman, 2017). The process of migration, whether voluntary or not, is inherently challenging for individuals and families, involving a substantial shift away from one's home country and the complex task of integrating into an unfamiliar environment and culture. This transition can be psychologically taxing, with potentially detrimental effects on mental health. The World Health Organisation (2023) highlights that migrants often face higher prevalence rates of common mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This elevated risk is compounded by the prevailing negative societal attitudes towards migration, further amplifying the challenges to the mental well-being of migrants (Hasan et al., 2021). With global migration expected to continue to increase (United Nations, 2023), addressing the psychological impact of migration is crucial, not only for the sake of individual migrants but also for the overall mental health landscape within diverse societies.

---

Despite its profound contributions and historical significance, recent years have witnessed migration evolve into a sensitive and charged topic within the UK, shaping political discourse, and influencing public sentiment.

In response to these challenges, therapeutic interventions such as art therapy have gained recognition for their potential to enhance individual well-being. Art therapy involves using creative processes as a psychotherapeutic tool to express thoughts and emotions, conducted by trained therapists in either group or individual settings. It employs established models of interaction and intervention to guide the therapeutic process (Malchiodi, 2003). Art therapy has been shown to support identity development and contribute to reductions in stress, loneliness, depression, anxiety and overall distress while also improving mood and self-esteem (Fazel, 2002; Uttley et al., 2015). Recent research has highlighted the benefits of art therapy for individuals who have experienced migration (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017; Kay, 2000). For instance, Kay (2000) found that engaging in visual arts can foster community bonding and help migrants reinforce their cultural identity. In addition, art therapy can provide a valuable space for emotional expression and the exploration of sensitive memories, facilitating communication and allowing migrants to revisit, discuss, and manage difficult topics.





*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops June 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza

Despite its demonstrated efficiency, art therapy, like all therapeutic approaches, has limitations. A qualitative systematic review of the acceptability and relative benefits of art therapy by Uttley et al., (2015) identified key barriers to participation. These included fear of not being good at art, a lack of understanding of art therapy and the perception that art therapy is restricted to people with certain medical conditions. Further, some participants may perceive it as “superficial,” “childish,” or “self-indulgent”. Moreover, challenges related to accessibility, including financial limitations, work constraints, and stigma, can render art therapy unavailable for some individuals (Adoni-Kroyanker et al., 2018).

A less explored but promising alternative to art therapy is the socially engaged method of participatory art, defined as engagement with art set up within a recreational, social, or research context with little or no direct therapeutic focus (Rose et al., 2018). Whilst participatory art and art therapy are sometimes positioned against one another, there can be similarities in that artmaking, whether in a participatory or an art therapy context, can both use expressive media and be experienced as therapeutic whether intentional or not (Tsisris et al., 2014). The distinction between the two lies in the context and purpose. Definitions relevant to this research are outlined below.

- **Art Therapy:** Utilizing art as a psychotherapeutic method to convey thoughts and emotions. Facilitated by trained therapists in either group or individual sessions, employing recognized models of interaction and intervention (Malchiodi, 2003)
- **Participatory Art:** Placing a central focus on human interaction and the active participation of individuals in the creation and experience of art (Kelly, 2014)
- **Socially Engaged Art or Social Practice:** Derived from the social movements of the 1960s centring on process and site-specificity, the artist into an individual whose speciality includes working with society in a professional capacity (Helguera, 2011)

---

While the primary aim of participatory art is not explicitly therapeutic, studies have shown that participants often gain indirect benefits from these artistic activities and groups, as evidenced in both community and research contexts.

While the primary aim of participatory art is not explicitly therapeutic, studies have shown that participants often gain indirect benefits from these artistic activities and groups, as evidenced in both community and research contexts (Tseklevs et al. 2018). Thus, participatory art, without the need for trained therapists, emerges as a potentially more accessible tool for enhancing the mental health of individuals who have experienced migration. Accordingly, this Qualitative Research Report delves into the impact of participatory art on the well-being and identity of first and second-generation migrants.

This Qualitative Research Report is situated within the framework of *Traces: Stories of Migration*, a socially engaged practice research project led by visual artist and researcher Lucy Orta in partnership with the University of the Arts London's Portal Centre for Social Impact and Centre for Sustainable Fashion; and funded by the Arts Council of England, The Portal Trust, and Foundation for Future London. *Traces: Stories of Migration* was divided into three phases: community engagement leading to the creation of participant outputs, Lucy Orta's responsive outputs, and the exhibition of the resulting outcomes.

The community engagement phase was conducted across three community centres in the boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets in east London. This phase aimed to collect and translate the memories and experiences of first- and second-generation migrants through the creative medium of textiles. The primary objective was to explore how cloth and stitch could be used to express and celebrate the diverse cultural and social experiences of migrant communities. In the workshops participants created unique textile-based artefacts known as Story Cloths, to express and share their diverse experiences.

The project employed a range of visual-arts methods, including oral and mapping, storytelling and textile-based practice in group settings, facilitated by Lucy Orta with trained professionals. This approach enabled participants to share personal narratives and textile knowledge collectively and to practice or learn new textile crafts resulting in the creation of Story Cloths that visually or conceptually depicted personal and/or familial migration experiences. Drawing on the multicultural fabric of east London, specifically the migration history associated with the East End Rag Trade, the project sought to offer a positive and engaging artistic experience, fostering community connections and providing a space for individuals to contextualise, reflect on and express their migration history in an original format.

While existing research on the impact of participatory art on mental health in migrant populations remains limited, a pivotal study by Martone and Çili (2024) delved into the positive effects of creating Story Cloths on first- and second-generation migrants. Their investigation, situated within *Traces: Stories of Migration*, engaged five migrants who participated in the pilot phase of workshops. Employing an interpretative phenomenological approach, Martone and Çili unveiled that narrative craft and the creation of stories helped empower participants to make sense of their past experiences and enhance their self-confidence. Specifically, Martone and Çili argue that the making of Story Cloths about their migration experience helped facilitate the process called autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) in the autobiographical memory literature. By working with textiles surrounded by other migrants and listening to each other's ideas and perspectives, participants were able to reflect on their migration and view it from a different perspective.

Building upon this foundation, the present Qualitative Research Report aims to explore how the participatory methods used within the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project influenced the well-being and identity of the first and second-generation migrants who took part. By examining an exemplary socially engaged and participatory art project grounded in psychological



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Portraits by Lucy Orta exhibited  
at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
Photography Jack Elliot Edwards

literature, this Qualitative Research Report sheds light on how participatory art methods can positively impact the well-being of migrant communities without necessarily addressing difficult or traumatic memories. The Qualitative Research Report extends the findings of Martone and Çili (2024) by specifically focusing on methods employed by visual artist Lucy Orta.

The following sections will begin by examining current migration statistics in the UK and the importance of migration on the country's fashion and textile industry. Subsequently, we will delve into the context of first and second-generation migrations, exploring the challenges of the migration processes and the potential mental health outcomes. This literature forms the basis for investigating the participatory arts in the context of the mental health of migrants. The elucidation of research methods will encompass qualitative participatory and data analysis techniques. This will be succeeded by a section dedicated to exploring the research findings. Lastly, an evaluation of the intervention will appraise the potential of arts-based approaches such as *Traces: Stories of Migration* to contribute to the mental health of migrants and migrant communities.



1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. The Study Aims
4. Method
5. Results and Discussion
6. Conclusions  
References

# Literature Review

2

## 2.1 Migration Within The UK

### Definitions

According to the IOM (2019), the term migrant serves as an overarching concept not explicitly defined in international law, encapsulating the common understanding of an individual who relocates from their usual place of residence, either within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for various reasons. It implies a process of uprooting from one location and settling in another. Aligning with Martone and Çili (2024), the term migrant in this research is employed as an umbrella term encompassing individuals who have directly experienced migration or have familial ties to migration. It is important to note that the term migrant includes the term immigrant, as the latter is selectively used only when referring to individuals who voluntarily migrated from one country to another and permanently resettled in a different cultural context. The distinction is made to avoid exclusionary language that overlooks individuals relocating within the same country or those entering a new country as refugees.

### Migration Figures in the UK

Aligned with global migration trends, migration to the UK has experienced an upward trajectory in recent years. In 2022 the country saw a substantial influx of 1.2 million individuals contributing to a record-breaking net migration of 745,000 (Cheatham, 2023). To compare, net migration was 226,000 in 2019 (Cheatham, 2023). In late 2023, net migration peaked at over 900,000 (McNeil, 2024). This represents a more than threefold increase since 2019. Although recent visa restrictions have reduced this figure to 728,000, net migration remains substantially higher than pre-2019 levels.

There is ongoing debate regarding whether UK migration numbers will continue to increase. On one hand, The Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggests it is too early to determine whether this upward trajectory will persist (Cheatham, 2023). Conversely, the United Nations (UN) anticipates a continued global rise in migration, citing escalating conflicts, the adverse impacts of climate change, and other environmental factors (United Nations, 2023). The uncertainty surrounding future migration patterns underscores the complexity of this evolving global phenomenon. Regardless, it is evident that addressing the challenges associated with migrating to a new country and mitigating mental health risks remains a pressing and vital need.

### Migration within the Fashion and Textile Industry

The UK textile and fashion sector, a dynamic and ever-evolving industry, has been profoundly shaped by successive waves of migration, each contributing unique skills and specialities that have fuelled its growth and

---

The UK textile and fashion sector, a dynamic and ever-evolving industry, has been profoundly shaped by successive waves of migration, each contributing unique skills and specialities that have fuelled its growth and innovation.

innovation. This interplay of diverse influences has rendered the industry heavily reliant on international talent, fostering collaboration and benefiting from the freedom of movement (Turner, 2021). As quoted by Daniel Rubin of The Dune Group, “It is difficult to think of an industry that has been more affected by immigration” (Thomson, 2020).

In the broader context, the cumulative effect of migration on the UK fashion industry cannot be overstated. Many of today’s biggest brands and retailers are led by individuals who were not British born, or by their descendants.

At the centre of this vibrant history lies London’s East End, a longstanding home to ‘The Rag Trade’ for over 250 years. This district serves as a living testament to the enduring legacy of migration on the UK’s textile and fashion landscape, showcasing the vital role played by diverse communities in shaping the industry. Originating in the 1700s with French Huguenot refugees, who brought with them expert weaving skills, ‘The Rag Trade’ has evolved through subsequent waves of migration (Thompson, 2020). In 1881 The French Huguenot weavers made way for around 100,000 Jewish migrants, who left an indelible mark on the area’s tailoring and shoe legacy. Entrepreneurs from this community, mainly from Eastern European countries, founded businesses integral to British fashion, with iconic brands like Marks & Spencer’s and Dune established by Polish and Russian Jewish migrants during this period. The narrative extends into the 20th century with the arrival of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi families to the UK. These communities have not only added cultural richness but have also been instrumental in shaping the landscape of today’s fashion retail giants. Retail brands such as Quiz and Boohoo, thriving in the contemporary market, owe their existence to the entrepreneurial spirit and creativity brought by these migrant groups (Thompson, 2020).



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops June 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza

In the broader context, the cumulative effect of migration on the UK fashion industry cannot be overstated. Many of today’s biggest brands and retailers are led by individuals who were not British born, or by their descendants. The rich mosaic of skills, experiences, and cultural influences brought by migrants has not only shaped the aesthetics and artisanry of British fashion but has also infused it with fresh ideas and entrepreneurialism. As the industry continues to evolve, it remains imperative to recognize and celebrate the lasting contributions of migrant communities that have woven themselves into the fabric of the UK’s vibrant fashion landscape (Thompson, 2020).

## 2.2 Migration Challenges

The migration process can be very challenging. While acknowledging the multifaceted nature of these challenges and their impact on migrants, the current Qualitative Research Report follows the direction of Martone and Çili (2024) and primarily centres on acculturation, identity and autobiographical memory. These aspects play a significant role, offering a contextual understanding of how participatory art could influence and bring benefits to migrant communities.

### Acculturation

Acculturation plays an important role in understanding how migration can affect individuals' well-being and mental health. It is intricately linked with the migration experience, playing a pivotal role in shaping individuals' identities as they navigate through the process of adapting to a new cultural milieu.

---

In the context of international migration, acculturation represents the adaptive process in which individuals reshape their thinking to align with a new culture and environment.

Acculturation, as defined by Berry (2015), is the “dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members”. It involves the dynamic interplay between the native and host cultures. In the context of international migration, acculturation represents the adaptive process in which individuals reshape their thinking to align with a new culture and environment (Matsumoto & Juang, 2023). This challenges individuals to adjust their behaviours, norms, values and attitudes, often promoting the revaluation of their cultural identity (Berry & Sam, 2016)

Acculturation can occur in varying degrees, ranging from minimal adaption (e.g., trying new foods) to complete integration (e.g., learning the language of the next culture). It can also result in different outcomes. Berry (1997, 2015) proposed two dimensions influential to individuals' adaptation to a new culture and resultant outcomes: 1) the decision to either retain or reject their native culture. and 2) the inclination to embrace or resist the new culture. The interplay of these factors gives rise to four distinct acculturation strategies:

1. **Integration:** Adopting the cultural norms of the new culture whilst preserving the original culture
2. **Assimilation:** Severing ties with the heritage culture, opting instead to identify solely with the new culture in the new culture.
3. **Separation:** Maintaining the heritage culture while deliberately avoiding engagement with the new culture.
4. **Marginalization:** Neither upholding connections with the original heritage culture nor integrating with the new culture.

### Acculturative Stresses

The transition to social and cultural systems different to one's own can lead to acculturative stress, both psychological and physical. It is essential to recognize that acculturation and acculturative stress are distinct concepts (Gil et al., 1994). While some stressors may be inherent in the acculturation process, not all acculturation experiences result in stress.



## Cultural Identity and Loss

While individuals possess unique personal identities, they are also members of various social groups, such as cultural or socioeconomic ones, which significantly influence their collective identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The process of acculturation can lead to the construction and reconstruction of an individual's cultural identity (Bhugra, 2004). As migrants integrate into a new society, they may lose familiar cultural norms, traditions, and support systems, prompting a re-evaluation of their identity components (Guler & Berman, 2019). Cultural identity, encompassing elements like nationality, ethnicity, religion, dietary habits, language, and social class, is a fundamental aspect of an individual's self-perception.

---

The process of reshaping cultural identity during acculturation can cause stress. The process can trigger grief reactions and contribute to adverse mental health outcomes, including heightened anxiety, diminished self-esteem, alienation, and loneliness.

The process of reshaping cultural identity during acculturation can cause stress. The process can trigger grief reactions and contribute to adverse mental health outcomes, including heightened anxiety, diminished self-esteem, alienation, and loneliness (Montgomery, 2008). Post-migration stressors, such as culture shock and conflict, can intensify feelings of cultural confusion, further exacerbating experiences of alienation, isolation, and depression often felt by migrants (Bhugra, 2004).

Host societies' attitudes, including racism, can compound the challenges of acculturation. Stressors like unemployment, achievement gaps, financial hardships, legal concerns, poor housing, and limited opportunities for advancement, compound the challenges of acculturation, amplifying mental health problems among already vulnerable individuals.

Research suggests several strategies to mitigate the negative impact of migration.

1. **Community:** Developing a community and establishing supporting social engagements can help migrants cope with the challenges of acculturation (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978).
2. **Self-Exploration:** Allowing migrants the opportunity to explore and understand themselves in their new surroundings can be extremely beneficial in alleviating the negative effects of acculturation and cultural identity reprisals (Bhugra & Becker, 2005).
3. **Acknowledging Migration Effects:** Recognizing the impact of migration on one's identity can help mitigate some of the negative psychological stressors and promote successful adaptation (Rong & Fitchet, 2008)

These findings suggest that participatory art may offer benefits to migrants by providing a safe space for individuals to share their migration journeys with others who have undergone similar experiences, helping foster a sense of empathy and belonging among like-minded individuals. In addition, the process of creating artwork may be beneficial to help migrants communicate their complex experiences of acculturation, reflect on challenges faced and explore the effects on identity development.

Moreover, integration and assimilation play important roles in mitigating feelings of loss and grief as migrants embrace aspects of the new culture. When individuals from the new culture appreciate and acknowledge the immigrant's cultural heritage, it not only enhances understanding but also addresses the unique needs of those who have migrated (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). Participatory art holds significant potential to enhance the well-being of migrants by positively influencing the perception of migrant communities

within host societies. Sharing narratives through mediums like Story Cloths can foster empathy and understanding towards the journeys and experiences migrants undergo. By displaying these narratives to the public, Story Cloths may contribute to building positive attitudes and perspectives towards migration within the local community. This process, in turn, creates a more supportive and inclusive acculturative environment, thereby mitigating acculturative stress for migrants.

### **Autobiography memory**

Drawing on Martone and Çili (2024), this Qualitative Research Report relies on the literature on autobiographical reasoning and self-event connections to further shed light on the link between past events, such as migration, and an individual's sense of self. Autobiographical reasoning describes the “activity of creating relations between different parts of one's past, present, and future life and one's personality and development” (Habermas, 2011, p. 27). According to the literature, as individuals engage in the reflective process of autobiographical reasoning, drawing conclusions about their identity, the creation of narrative coherence fosters a sense of self-continuity and a coherent narrative identity (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In McAdams's Theory of Personality (1993) personality comprises dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and narrative identity. Within the theory, autobiographical memory, particularly self-defining memories (SDMs), plays a crucial role

*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops September 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza





*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Story Cloths by participants  
exhibited at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
Photography Jack Elliot Edwards

in shaping an individual's narrative identity. As Martone and Çili point out, migration is likely to be an emotional experience which shapes how individuals see or define themselves.

Transitioning to the realm of textile narratives and craft, artistic and storytelling activities offer avenues for individuals to make sense of their lives and foster well-being. Engaging in creative activities, including textile practice, has been linked to meaning-making, identity development, and stress reduction (Malchiodi, 2002). Notably, narrative psychology and narrative therapy underscore the positive impact of telling and reframing past stories on well-being and mental health (McAdams, 2020). Representing past experiences through tactual making, such as textile craft, can contribute to shaping one's sense of self and place in the world (Pöllänen, 2015). It helps people get in touch with and connect to their personal subjective experiences.

## 2.3 Arts Engagement

### **Socially Engaged Art**

Social practice, or socially engaged art, encompasses various artistic forms that engage people and communities in discussions, partnerships, and/or social interactions, where the community is the subject. Social practice can be defined as "art that's socially engaged, where the social interaction is, at some level, the art itself" (Finkelpearl, 2013, p. 416). The participatory aspect of socially engaged practice is essential, placing greater emphasis on the creative process rather than the final artworks (Bishop, 2012).



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops September 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza



In contrast to traditional art history, which often focuses on completed artworks, socially engaged art prioritizes effecting change through the process of art making rather than the final product (Kester, 2011). This form of art frequently extends beyond conventional venues and delves into actual social contexts, bridging various social disciplines. These projects are usually situated within specific social and cultural settings known as communities, highlighting the importance of understanding the social context in collaboration with participants and broader audiences. Conversation and collaboration are essential in socially engaged art practices, fostering productive exchanges and the potential for social change (Helguera, 2011). The active involvement of community members in creating the work distinguishes socially engaged art, promoting expanding social relationships, empowerment, critical thinking, and sustainability (Bishop, 2012).

Participation in art can have a positive impact on those involved and may have the accumulative effect of benefiting the local and wider community by having engaged citizens. However, these benefits are only achievable when projects are well-considered and managed. In the context of migration, participatory art practices represent a promising avenue for enhancing the mental health of migrant communities. Socially engaged practices can effectively explore migrant experiences through participatory activities within the community, offering individuals opportunities to process their experiences and foster overall well-being. Creative visual artistic endeavours, including textile-based practices, have been correlated with processes such



---

Socially engaged art uses diverse approaches to connect with communities and groups, positively impacting participants' lives.

as meaning-making, identity development, and stress reduction (Malchiodi, 2002). Additionally, socially engaged art uses diverse approaches to connect with communities and groups, positively impacting participants' lives (Aliakbari & Elham, 2011).

Furthermore, social practice is often aligned with activism, addressing political issues (especially post-Brexit) and fostering meaningful dialogues within communities that are negatively impacted by political rhetoric. Artists engaged in social and participatory practices invest considerable time in integrating into specific communities, underscoring the embedded and collaborative nature of the art. This integration enables artists to work collectively towards common goals, raise awareness, give voice to, and enhance both the physical and psychological well-being of communities, mitigating the negative impacts of migration (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). In addition, providing migrants with the opportunity to explore and understand themselves in their new surroundings could be beneficial in alleviating some of the adverse effects of acculturation and cultural identity challenges (Choy et al., 2021; (Wu et al., 2018)

### **Participatory Art**

Participatory art emerges as a unique subset of socially engaged practices, placing a central focus on human interaction and social discourse (Kelly, 2014). Participatory art involves the active participation of individuals beyond the artist or art collective in the creation and experience of art. It shifts away from the traditional model of a passive audience consuming a finished product, fostering a more inclusive and interactive approach (Kelly, 2014).

The participatory art process can take various forms, ranging from collective creation, where a diverse group contributes to shaping the artwork, to participatory actions that are considered art in themselves. Although this broad umbrella term encompasses a spectrum of artistic practices, the common thread is the emphasis on collaboration, dialogue, and shared experiences as integral components of the artistic endeavour. As a result of this, participatory art challenges traditional notions of authorship and the role of the artist, democratizing the creative process and making it more accessible to a wider audience. It goes beyond the confines of traditional art spaces, often venturing into real-world social contexts and engaging with diverse communities. The resulting artworks, while significant, are not always the primary focus; instead, equal importance is placed on the collaborative process, fostering a sense of shared ownership and collective creativity.

## Traces: Stories of Migration

*Traces: Stories of Migration* is a key example of a socially engaged research practice and an exemplary instance of participatory art devised by visual artist, Professor Orta at the University of the Arts London. In this project, first- and second-generation migrants were invited to participate in a programme of workshops that used textile practice as a storytelling device to visually portray familial or personal migration experiences within the context of the East London area and the historic East London 'Rag Trade'. The outcomes were displayed in two public-facing exhibitions in London.

The project was conducted in three phases: community engagement leading to the creation of two distinct outputs, Story Cloths created by participants involved and the Portrait Gallery created by Lucy Orta in response to the process. Alongside the Story Cloths and the Portrait Gallery, two outcomes of the project, a film by David Bickerstaff and a book of poetry by Nathalie Abi-Ezzi were presented in exhibitions at the Nunnery Gallery, Bow Arts (2 June – 27 August 2023) and UAL East Bank, London College of Fashion (2 October 2023 to 19 January 2024).

Community engagement involved 87 residents from the London Boroughs of Newham and Tower Hamlets from 37 different migrant heritage backgrounds, recruited by the Portal Centre for Social Impact and community partner organizations through mailing lists, poster campaigns, social media, and word-of-mouth. Four workshops, each lasting seven weeks, were hosted by the local community centres, Making for Change, Bromley by Bow, Rosetta Arts, and The Lab E20. Situating the project within familiar community contexts ensured a locally rooted and shared connection to migrant families or personal migration experiences. Embracing an embedded and situated approach (Mazzarella et al., 2023), the workshop setting facilitated deep listening and idea generation aligned with participants' intentions.

---

The weekly workshop sessions became inclusive spaces where storytelling intersected with tactile creativity. This intuitive approach evolved organically, guided by each participant's story.

The engagement devised by Lucy Orta, proposed oral and written storytelling and textile as a primary methodology, delving into the distinctive expressive potential offered by creating textile artefacts. The weekly workshop sessions became inclusive spaces where storytelling intersected with tactile creativity. This intuitive approach evolved organically, guided by each participant's story. With creative freedom unrestricted by a prescribed format, participants expressed their migration journeys in a range of pictorial and conceptual forms using techniques including appliqué, embroidery, crochet, knitting, and block printing, to create two- or three-dimensional Story Cloths. The sharing of traditional craft heritage and textile skills played pivotal roles in shaping original approaches to the creation of each Story Cloth. A total 150 individual outputs were created including 77 Story Cloths by participants and 47 portraits by Lucy Orta.



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops September 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. **The Study Aims**
4. Method
5. Results and Discussion
6. Conclusions  
References

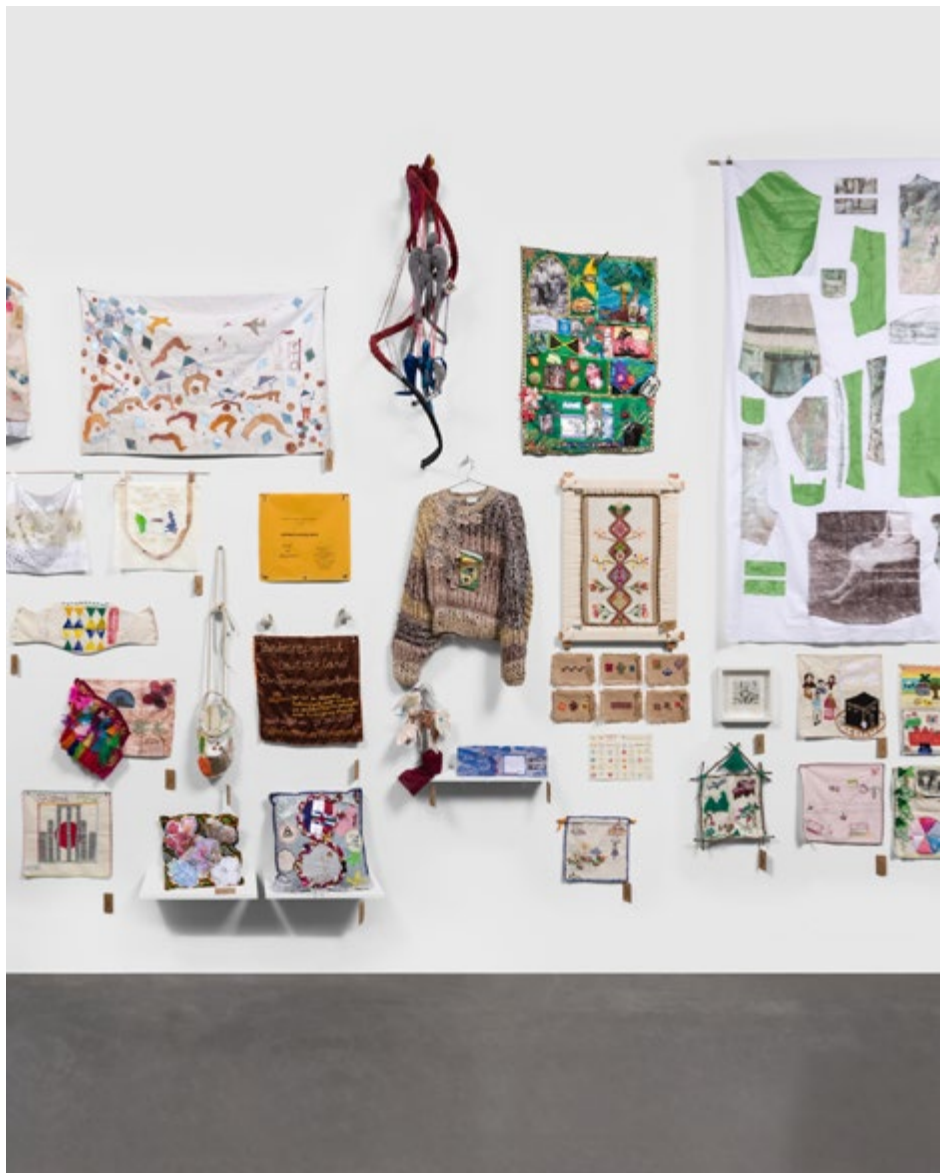
# The Study Aims

3



Taking into consideration the literature discussed, this Qualitative Research Report aims to explore the use of participatory art, employing textiles as a medium, with people who experienced migration themselves or within their families. Qualitative methods were adopted with a focus on capturing the experiences of *Traces: Stories of Migration* participants.

*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Story Cloths by participants  
exhibited at LCF, UAL  
East Bank. Photography  
Jack Elliot Edwards



1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. The Study Aims
4. **Method**
5. Results and Discussion
6. Conclusions  
References

# Method

4

## 4.1 Participant Interviews

First and second-generation migrants who were involved in the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project were recruited for the current Qualitative Research Report. After obtaining written consent from the participants, the project coordinator shared their contact details with the researchers who invited them to voluntarily take part in the research. A total of 8 participants took part. All participants were 18 or older and signed a consent form before participating.

## 4.2 Materials and Research Design

To investigate how the participatory art methods employed by Lucy Orta in *Traces: Stories of Migration* can positively impact the well-being of migrant communities, a qualitative approach was chosen. Semi-structured interview schedules were employed as they facilitate an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while allowing for a smooth and adaptive interview process.

The interview schedule was designed to address two main objectives: 1) to assess the impact of the workshops and Story Cloth creation on participants, and 2) to explore their experiences with the workshops, Story Cloth creation, and the subsequent public-facing exhibitions of their work. The schedule featured open-ended questions aimed at gathering comprehensive insights into participants' experiences. This format allowed for flexibility, enabling the interviewer to tailor questions and discussions to each participant's unique perspective. Such an approach provided participants the opportunity to express their perceptions and feelings in their own words (Sarantakos, 2012).

## 4.3 Procedure

Ethics for the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project was approved by the University of the Arts London, London College of Fashion Research Ethics Committee. Participants, who had all participated in the project workshops and exhibitions, were invited to join the research voluntarily via email. Before their participation, each individual received an information sheet and signed a consent form. They were informed of their right to take breaks, halt the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time.

The one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams (<https://teams.microsoft.com/>) and were recorded for accuracy. Each interview lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. After collecting basic demographic information, participants were guided through the interview schedule, which was used flexibly to facilitate a natural conversation. After each interview, participants were debriefed both verbally and via email.



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops June 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza

## 4.4 Data Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed as near-verbatim as possible. The data was analysed thematically, guided by the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved repeated reading of each transcript, assigning codes to capture key ideas, organising codes into potential themes and refining themes.

## 4.5 Reflexivity

Two researchers were involved in collecting data for this Qualitative Research Report. Both researchers have migration histories, were aware of their own migration-related experiences, and made concerted efforts to minimize their preconceptions about the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Despite efforts to reduce bias, there remains a risk that their personal experiences could influence the interview process and the analysis of data (Dodgson, 2019).

During the interviews, participants were informed of the researchers' migration backgrounds to foster a deeper and more empathetic dialogue, creating a shared understanding that might enrich conversations.



1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. The Study Aims
4. Method
5. **Results and Discussion**
6. Conclusions  
References

# Results and Discussion

5

Guided by the principles of qualitative analysis, the following section examines the impact of the participatory art methods used in *Traces: Stories of Migration* on participants. It highlights key themes and presents evidence drawn from participants' own words to support the findings.

#### **Theme 1: Safe Space in Participatory Art**

Creating safe and inclusive environments is important when working with vulnerable groups, such as migrants, who may experience trauma, loss, and a sense of isolation. The *Traces: Stories of Migration* workshops exemplified this by providing a space where participants could freely explore and express their personal migration stories. Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized the non-judgmental atmosphere of the workshops, which allowed them to share their experiences openly. This theme being echoed across many interviews underscores the important role that safety and inclusivity play in participatory art practices.

---

Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized the non-judgmental atmosphere of the workshops, which allowed them to share their experiences openly.

P4 for example shared, "I felt comfortable to talk about my experience and background. It was really humbling." This sense of comfort enabled her to share her migration experiences without fear. Her quote underscores the importance of a safe environment in encouraging participants to engage in storytelling practices.

Similarly, P7 highlighted the emotional security provided by the workshop, stating, "It felt more like a safe space. Because everybody had some connections to direct migration or secondary migration. It felt like we weren't in a place where if you told your story, it felt like a safe place to sit back and share." This shared experience of migration among participants fostered a supportive atmosphere, allowing her to open up without fear of judgment.

P1 also echoed this sentiment, saying, "And I shared my life with them openly. I felt comfortable enough to do that." These testimonies collectively illustrate how the workshop's design facilitated a safe space which seemed to help participants to share their stories.

The emphasis on safety and inclusion aligns with the broader literature on the importance of creating supportive environments, particularly when working with individuals from more vulnerable backgrounds. As highlighted by Akhtar and Lovell (2018), fostering a non-judgmental, inclusive environment is crucial in reducing the psychological stress associated with discussing sensitive topics like migration. Migrants often carry the psychological burden

of separation from their homeland, societal exclusion, and the pressure to assimilate (Berry, 1997). In this context, a safe, inclusive environment – like that of *Traces: Stories of Migration* – not only may help reduce anxiety but may also facilitate emotional exploration and self-expression, which is essential for healing and identity development (Bishop, 2012).

The workshops were intentionally designed to create this safe, supportive environment. By situating the project within familiar community settings in East London, participants could engage meaningfully and with a sense of comfort. This reflects Bishop's (2012) assertion that participatory art thrives in easily accessible, community-centred spaces, which are crucial for fostering a sense of security and belonging. The presence of culturally sensitive spaces that align with participants' lived experiences likely helped reduce emotional barriers, allowing for more profound engagement with the creative process. By enabling participants to process emotions in a non-threatening environment, safe spaces can lead to emotional release and healing. As such, participatory art projects like *Traces* serve as important resources for emotional and psychological well-being.

*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops November 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza



## Theme 2: Identity Formation and Autobiographical Reasoning

One of the central themes that emerged was the role of *Traces: Stories of Migration* in facilitating identity reconstruction through autobiographical reasoning. In line with the findings of Martone and Çili (2024), by creating art that reflected their migration experiences, participants were able to construct personal narratives, which seemed to help them to make sense of their past and present identities. This process emerged in the interviews, as participants shared how the project enabled them to reconnect with their cultural roots and help them understand their personal histories more deeply. Through this transformative journey, participants seemed to develop a stronger sense of self, evolving by revisiting and reinterpreting their migration narratives and translating these stories into tangible Story Cloths.

P4 exemplified this process by sharing how crafting her Story Cloth helped her explore and solidify her identity: “It’s really good for me. It’s almost like I’ve found myself. I know this is going really deep, but I do feel that doing this, bringing it onto the cloth, really allowed me to understand who I really am and where I am in society today. It helps me gain acceptance in where I am now. It’s that sense of acceptance in my well-being.”



*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Story Cloths by participants  
exhibited at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
Photography Jack Elliot Edwards

By engaging with her narrative and visually representing it in her Story Cloth, P4 was able to reconcile the complexities of her dual identities—one British and one rooted in her migrant background. Her process of reflection and creation aligns with Habermas and Bluck’s (2000) theory of autobiographical reasoning, which suggests that individuals create coherent life narratives by reflecting on significant events. For migrants, this process is particularly complex, as it involves reconciling the conflicting aspects of their pre- and post-migration identities. P4’s experience underscores how creating her Story Cloth helped her address the societal categorization that had previously fuelled her identity confusion, allowing her to find a sense of acceptance and well-being.

Moreover, the project facilitated storytelling. Storytelling can be beneficial as it allows individuals to externalize and process their experiences, thereby supporting the therapeutic and identity-affirming aspects of narrating one’s life journey. This was evident in the interviews. For instance, P6 noted how the workshop enabled her to explore personal and cultural narratives: “This project helped me rediscover my heritage and express it freely. It gave me a platform to show Romania in a positive light.” This underscores the project’s role in fostering both individual reflection and collective exploration

---

Storytelling can be beneficial as it allows individuals to externalize and process their experiences, thereby supporting the therapeutic and identity-affirming aspects of narrating one's life journey.

of identity. She further echoed this sentiment, describing how the project led to a rediscovery of her Romanian heritage: "For me, this project was a rediscovery of who I am. It made me reconnect with my roots; while also celebrating the new life I've created in London."

These quotes align with prior literature emphasizing how storytelling can be valuable in identity formation, particularly for migrants navigating the tension between their heritage and their new environment. Pöllänen (2015) explored how representing past experiences through tactile creation, such as textile crafts, can help shape one's sense of self and place in the world. Both P4's and P6's experiences exemplify this notion. For P4, reflecting on her experiences and embedding them into her Story Cloth provided clarity and a stronger connection to her identity. For P6, engaging with her migration story helped her to bridge the gap between her Romanian heritage and her present life in London. By reflecting on her past and celebrating her new life, P6 was allowed to honour both aspects of her identity, demonstrating the power of participatory art in facilitating this dual reflection.

Furthermore, the process of identity reconstruction experienced by participants through *Traces: Stories of Migration* aligns with McAdams' (1993) theory, which posits that narrative identity—how individuals understand their lives through the stories they tell about themselves—is central to psychological well-being. By having to represent their story visually, participants had to externalize their experiences and begin integrating them into their broader sense of identity. As Martone and Çili (2024) also point out, translating their thoughts and feelings into a tangible product gave some participants the chance to view their experiences from a different perspective. The act of creating representations of these narratives seemed to allow them to make sense of their past while establishing a stronger, more cohesive self-concept.

*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops September 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza





### Theme 3: Tools to Aid Reflection and the Creative Process

Building on the prior theme, theme 3 examines the structured tools employed by *Traces: Stories of Migration*—such as the Community Activity Book and guided exercises—and their role in facilitating autobiographical reasoning. These tools provided a framework for participants to delve deeper into their personal histories, facilitating both the creative process and the exploration of their identities. By offering tangible prompts, the project encouraged participants to engage with aspects of their migration experiences in a reflective and organized manner, fostering a richer and more meaningful exploration of their pasts.

---

By offering tangible prompts, the project encouraged participants to engage with aspects of their migration experiences in a reflective and organized manner, fostering a richer and more meaningful exploration of their pasts.

Participants were guided by a questionnaire prompt that invited them to reflect on the sensory and emotional elements of migration, such as the colours or odours associated with their homeland or their first impressions upon arriving in the host country. These tools were beneficial in shaping participants' narratives and enhancing their creative expressions by giving them a structured approach to recounting their migration journeys. For example, for P3 the Community Activity Book and guided prompts served as essential tools in navigating her family's migration history: "With *Traces*, they had a book which gave you some ideas of where you can start. There were questions like: what are the colours of your flag? What are the smells of the country? What was your first thought when you came to the country?"

This structured guidance seemed to help foster autobiographical reasoning. For P3, the activity book's prompts encouraged a deeper investigation into her family's migration story, helping her to discover and reconnect with her heritage in a meaningful way. The reflective prompts allowed her to draw connections between her personal history and her broader cultural identity, which she might not have done otherwise. This illustrates how structured tools can facilitate the connection between personal and collective experiences. By encouraging participants to explore their own stories in new ways, these tools not only foster intergenerational dialogue and emotional discovery but also strengthen family bonds and deepen cultural understanding.

Similarly, P1 found that the step-by-step process offered by the project helped her create a holistic representation of her migration journey: "It showed us different stages to do... I needed to represent my whole journey, my whole life, with different aspects of it." By breaking down the complex narratives of migration into smaller, manageable stages, the tools could have enabled participants like P1 to approach their life stories with greater clarity and structure. This phased approach may have allowed them to process their migration experiences in a way that felt less overwhelming, allowing them to explore specific moments and emotions that may have been difficult to articulate otherwise.

Moreover, the tools provided by *Traces: Stories of Migration* align with Bishop's (2012) assertion that socially engaged art encourages critical self-exploration while making the creative process accessible to a broad audience. The prompts and exercises in the Community Activity Book enabled participants to gain new insights into their lives, promoting both personal growth and emotional healing. By offering a structured, reflective process, the project may have allowed participants to process and express complex emotions constructively. These reflective exercises grounded participants in the present and encouraged them to revisit the past, which is crucial for managing emotional responses to trauma. McAdams' (1993) research on narrative identity supports the idea that structuring the recall of memories—especially traumatic or emotionally charged ones—helps individuals build coherent and meaningful life stories. This process of

creating and refining one's narrative is essential for fostering resilience and psychological well-being, particularly for individuals with challenging migration histories.

#### **Theme 4 Craft as a Mediator of Non-Verbal Expression**

The use of textile-based practices in *Traces: Stories of Migration* offered participants an alternative mode of expression, which seemed beneficial, especially for those who found verbal communication challenging. Crafting activities, such as sewing, embroidery, and crochet became powerful non-verbal outlets for processing the emotional weight of migration stories and the complex feelings associated with them. This tactile form of expression enabled participants to externalize their inner experiences in a safe, structured, and therapeutic manner, effectively bypassing the limitations of language.

P1, for instance, articulated how crafting offered her an escape from the demands of daily life, creating a space for mental clarity: "Once I started, I didn't think of anything else. It was like an escape."

The process of crafting provided a meditative focus, enabling participants like P1 to step away from their immediate concerns and immerse themselves fully in the act of creation. This sense of immersion reflects the psychological benefits of tactile, repetitive activities, which allow individuals to concentrate their energy on a single task, fostering relaxation and emotional processing (Malchiodi, 2003). For migrants dealing with the trauma of displacement or the challenges of adapting to a new culture, crafting offered a form of respite—a space to work through complex emotions in a non-verbal manner.

*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops September 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza



---

The use of textiles as a medium for storytelling highlights the role of non-verbal creative expression in helping individuals convey narratives that may be difficult to articulate verbally, especially when dealing with trauma or language barriers.

Similarly, P2 emphasized how working with her hands allowed her to communicate aspects of her migration journey without needing to rely on words: “I like to make stories with my hands, especially with textiles.”

The use of textiles as a medium for storytelling highlights the role of non-verbal creative expression in helping individuals convey narratives that may be difficult to articulate verbally, especially when dealing with trauma or language barriers. Research by Cox et al., (2007) supports this therapeutic approach, demonstrating that non-verbal forms of expression—such as textile arts—can be highly effective in helping individuals process trauma, stress, and anxiety (Howie et al., 2013). The tactile, repetitive nature of crafting creates a calming and meditative space where participants can engage with their emotions, giving them the structure needed to process and release emotional tension. For P3, the act of crafting was not only therapeutic but also deeply symbolic, as it allowed her to connect with her cultural heritage: “It was like my heritage was coming alive through my hands. Working with my mom on this crochet blanket made me feel connected to my ancestors.”

In P3’s case, the creative process became a bridge between past and present, helping her reconcile her pre-migration identity with her life in the host country. Crafting within the project enabled participants to engage with culturally familiar practices—such as embroidery or crochet—which held personal significance. These traditions passed down through generations, provided a link to their heritage, allowing participants to draw strength from their cultural roots while navigating their new environments. This act of reconnecting with one’s heritage through craft can be particularly meaningful for migrants, as it fosters a sense of continuity between the past and present, helping individuals integrate their migration experiences into their evolving identity.

*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops November 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza



## Theme 5: Shared Identity and Collective Empowerment

A theme that emerged from the interviews was the sense of solidarity and collective empowerment that participants experienced by working together in *Traces: Stories of Migration*. Many participants reflected on how the act of creating in a shared space allowed them to build meaningful collections with others who had similar migration stories. P5 captured this sentiment, emphasizing how her participation in the creative process depended on her sense of connection with others: “It’s helped me a lot. I feel more connected to people through creativity.” Similarly, P4 was moved by the collective sharing of migration stories, describing how hearing others’ experiences resonated deeply with her: “Listening to their stories, it brought me to tears... it made me reflect on my own experience”.

The collective aspect of the workshops fostered an environment in which participants could form a sense of community. As P6 noted, the diversity within the group became a source of learning, allowing her to expand her understanding of migration experiences from different cultural perspectives: “Meeting people from all over the world made me realize how connected we all are through our stories of migration. It was inspiring to hear everyone’s unique journey.”

---

Many participants reflected on how the act of creating in a shared space allowed them to build meaningful collections with others who had similar migration stories.

This theme of shared identity and collective empowerment is supported by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which asserts that group belonging is often rooted in perceived similarities among group members. In *Traces*, the shared experience of migration created a strong sense of community among participants. This sense of connection seemed to mitigate feelings of isolation and enhance participants’ emotional support networks, reflecting the crucial role that socially engaged art plays in fostering communal bonds and reducing alienation (Bishop, 2012).

P3 further illustrated this collective excitement: “We were all very excited to see each other because we had heard each other’s stories” The frequent use of inclusive language, such as “we” and “our,” throughout the interviews suggests a deep integration of participants into the collective workshop experience. This sense of shared identity was particularly evident in P6’s reflection on her growing connection to both migrants and Londoners through the project: “Being part of *Traces* made me feel really joined up and in affinity with other migrants. I definitely identify as a Londoner.”

This collective identity could have helped participants navigate the potential alienation that can come with the acculturation process. Research on the acculturation process often highlights the isolation experienced by migrants as they attempt to integrate into a new culture (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). In contrast, *Traces* fostered a strong sense of belonging, with this shared identity of being a migrant emerging as a key bonding factor. This bond was not solely based on similar migration experiences but also on the act of sharing those stories in an empathetic and supportive environment, cultivating social cohesion (Mellmann, 2012).

Moreover, the workshop setting not only encouraged personal reflection but also facilitated co-creation and mutual learning, a concept central to Helguera’s (2011) idea of collaborative art. Participants shared their skills and ideas, enriching each other’s creative processes. P1 reflected on how the feedback from her peers positively impacted her artistic expression: “She was kind of saying, well, this symbol would fit with that, and in the end... it actually came together really nicely, and I’m happy with it.” The act of learning from others was reciprocal, with P2 expressing her enjoyment in supporting her peers: “You need to help. If they need something, for some

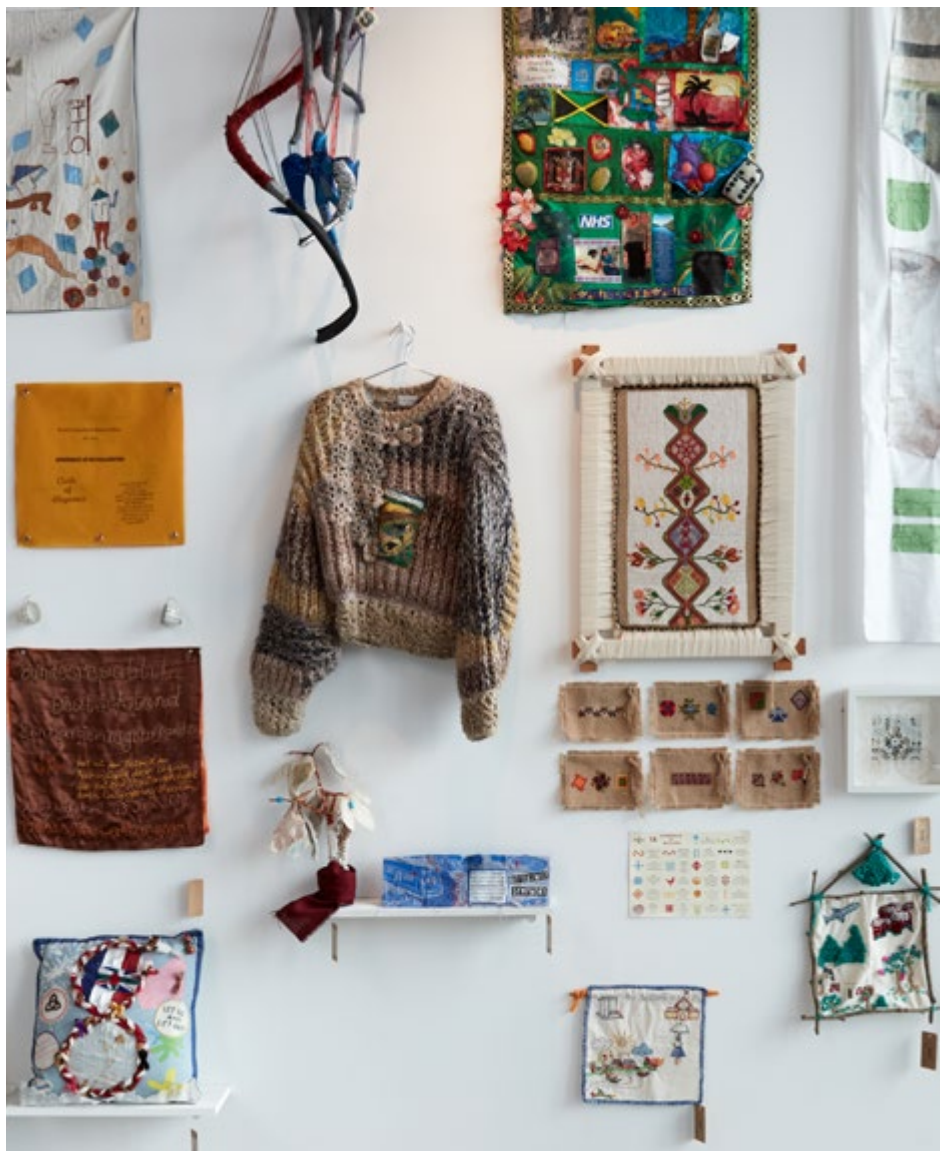


reason, I like to help.” This dynamic of mutual assistance created a social fabric where individuals contributed to both the collective creative outcome and to each other’s personal growth. P4 noted the transformative nature of this co-learning environment: “Although I brought my own skill to the table, I think I took more away from it... I gained an immense amount of knowledge.”

Beyond individual artistic growth, participants reported a robust sense of rapport and community engagement that significantly enhanced their creative and emotional experiences.

P8 echoed this, emphasizing the role of the project’s collaborative nature in helping her overcome personal challenges during the creative process: “But I’ve got through that, and I don’t... I would have not done that without, you know, without the support and the sort of collaborative feeling in the workshop.” This highlights the importance of participatory art as a medium for empowerment. Beyond individual artistic growth, participants reported a robust sense of rapport and community engagement that significantly enhanced their creative and emotional experiences. *Traces: Stories of Migration* successfully cultivated a sense of empowerment by fostering an environment where participants could learn from each other, develop new skills, and feel supported throughout their creative journeys. Relating this to the broader framework of participatory art, the project embodied the essence of collective empowerment. Collaborative workshops, such as those in *Traces: Stories of Migration*, encourage the integration of individual narratives into a collective whole, amplifying the power of shared stories. By creating opportunities for mutual learning, empowerment, and creative expression, the project successfully navigated the complexities of migration stories while fostering a deeply connected and supportive community.

*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Story Cloths by participants  
exhibited at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
Photography Jack Elliot Edwards



## Theme 6: Psychological Impact of Creative Expression:

The final theme looks at the potential therapeutic value of creative expression. Based on the interviews, *Traces: Stories of Migration* appeared to serve as a creative outlet and a form of well-being, offering participants the opportunity to express, process, and confront complex emotions through the act of creation.

For P5, the psychological benefits of engaging in artistic practice seemed apparent.: “I feel a lot better working creatively... it’s really helped me.” This reflects a common finding in art therapy research, where creative activities are associated with significant reductions in stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Malchiodi, 2003). Engaging in creative processes can activate emotional regulation mechanisms, providing participants with a structured way to explore difficult emotions while simultaneously promoting psychological healing. By channelling emotions into their artwork, *Traces: Stories of Migration* offered participants, like P5, a safe space to process trauma less overwhelmingly.

---

Engaging in creative processes can activate emotional regulation mechanisms, providing participants with a structured way to explore difficult emotions while simultaneously promoting psychological healing.

Similarly, P1 spoke to the therapeutic value of art in helping her process grief and trauma. For her, the creative process seemed to be a tool for emotional resolution and healing: “It helped me come to terms with my past... it was part of my journey to getting better mentally and physically.” P1’s reflections highlight how creative expression can facilitate emotional catharsis, allowing individuals to confront unresolved emotions in a safe and structured way. This process aligns with Csikszentmihályi’s (1990) Flow Theory, which suggests that immersion in creative tasks can induce a state of deep focus and fulfilment (Beck, 1992). When participants enter a “flow” state during artistic activities, they can experience a temporary escape from external stressors and a heightened sense of emotional clarity and control. P1’s experience of “coming to terms” with her past mirrors the positive psychological effects of flow, where individuals can engage fully with their emotions while creating something meaningful.

P6 shared that the creative process not only facilitated emotional healing but also helped boost her confidence as both an artist and a migrant. Participating in the project helped her develop a newfound sense of self-empowerment: “This project gave me more confidence—not just in myself, but in my art. I never thought of myself as an artist before, but now I feel empowered to keep creating.” P6’s experience underscores how participatory art projects can foster self-efficacy and personal growth. It is in line with Martone and Çili’s (2024) finding that the benefits of participation in the workshops extended beyond meaningful making: they involved even feelings of pride and self-confidence. By providing a platform where participants can explore their creative potential without fear of judgment, the workshops created a space where individuals like P6 could redefine their sense of self and claim a new identity—one that integrates both their migrant experiences and their creative abilities. This empowerment through art is a well-documented phenomenon in participatory art practices, where the act of creation is linked to increased self-esteem, a sense of agency, and a renewed belief in one’s ability to shape their narrative (Kapitan et al., 2011).

Moreover, For P3, the creative process reconnected her with heritage and family history, highlighting the therapeutic depth of the workshops. Art facilitated emotional and cultural reconnection, allowing her to engage with her past in a meaningful way. This reconciliation of identity aspects is central to the therapeutic benefits of creative expression. McAdams’ (1993) theory suggests that crafting stories, whether through words or art, integrates disparate life parts into a coherent narrative.

As previously mentioned, for P3, the creative process served as a bridge to reconnect with her heritage and family history. This illustrates the therapeutic depth of the workshops: “For me, art has always been like therapy. Working on this personal project helped me reconnect with my family and my heritage in a way I never had before.” P3’s reflections point to the unique role of art in facilitating emotional and cultural reconnection. Participatory art enabled her to engage with her family history in a tactile, meaningful way, creating a sense of continuity between her past and present. This ability to reconcile different aspects of one’s identity—particularly when shaped by migration—is central to the therapeutic benefits of creative expression. As suggested by McAdams’ (1993) narrative identity theory, the act of crafting stories, whether through words or art, enables individuals to integrate disparate parts of their lives into a coherent and empowering life narrative.

These insights collectively underscore the potential psychological impact of participatory art within *Traces: Stories of Migration*. Engaging in creative expression seemed to provide participants with a safe space to process trauma, confront unresolved emotions, and rebuild their identities in a more resilient and integrated way. By offering participants the opportunity to reflect on their migration experiences through art, the workshops promoted emotional well-being, helping individuals navigate complex feelings related to displacement, grief, and cultural belonging.

*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Workshops June 2022.  
Photography Lori Demaza



1. Introduction
  2. Literature Review
  3. The Study Aims
  4. Method
  5. Results and Discussion
  6. **Conclusions**
- References

# Conclusions

6

Human migration, a longstanding aspect of our existence, intricately weaves into the cultural fabric of nations, shaping their global connections. In the United Kingdom, migration has been instrumental in fostering economic prosperity, contributing to the public service workforce, and enriching the nation's cultural diversity.

Despite its historical significance, recent years have seen migration become a sensitive topic, influencing political discourse in the UK. This Qualitative Research Report explores the impact of the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project on the well-being and identity of first- and second-generation migrants in East London.

---

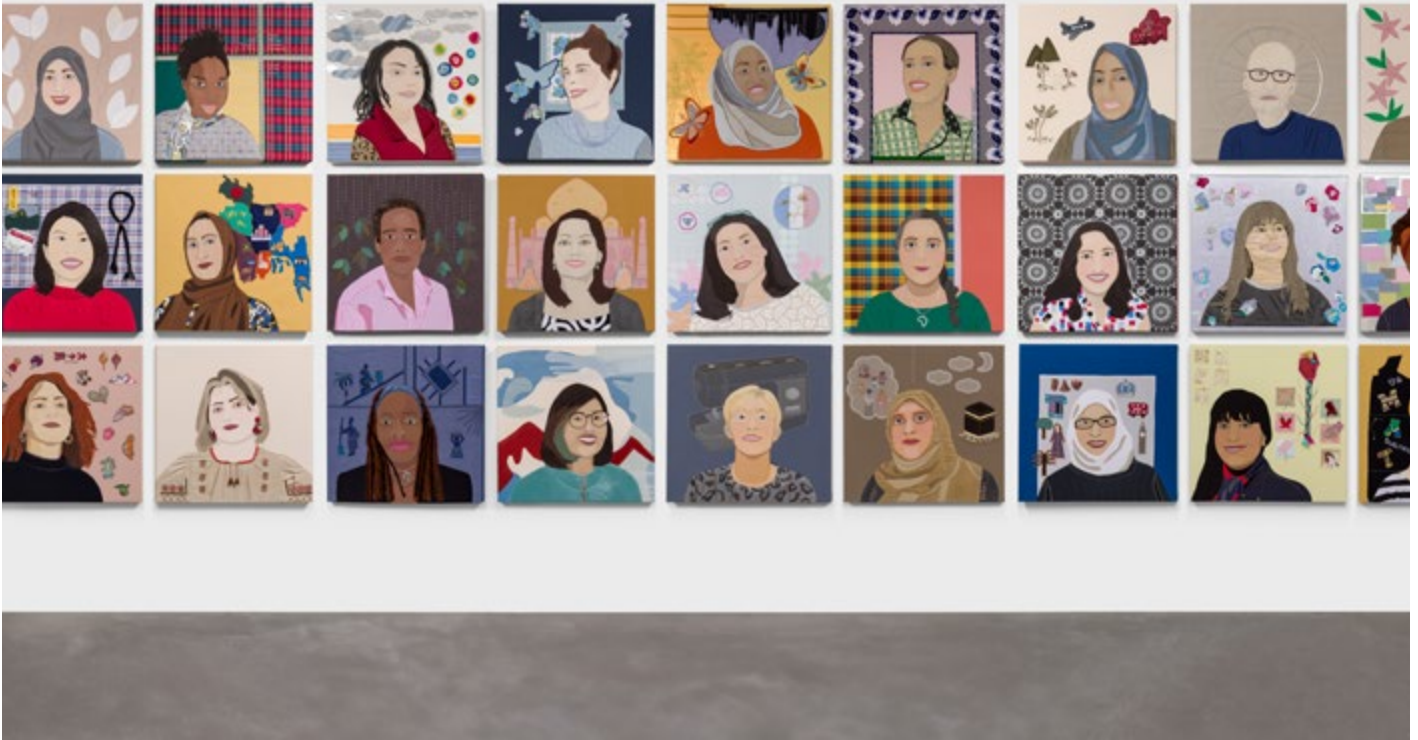
The analysis highlighted the potential power of participatory art as a tool for identity exploration and community building, emphasizing the benefits of the project's approach.

The analysis highlighted the potential power of participatory art as a tool for identity exploration and community building, emphasizing the benefits of the project's approach. By integrating textile-based practices and fostering a safe, collaborative environment, the project offered participants alternative modes of expression. This enabled them to explore their migration identities, complex emotions, and personal histories in a safe environment while cultivating community and empowerment. The therapeutic potential, such as improving well-being and reducing isolation, became apparent through the identified themes.

The findings of this research aimed to also build on those of Martone and Çili (2024), underscoring the impact of migration within the context of participatory art, particularly examining the use of textile craft and storytelling devices. The themes explored in this research align with existing literature exploring the challenges of migration. Acculturation, a central aspect of the migration process, appeared to influence participants' identity formation. The participants' narratives echo the acculturation strategies outlined by Berry (2015). The struggles of assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration, as discussed in the literature, are apparent in the personal stories shared during the project. The process of reshaping cultural identity, particularly related to feelings of loss and grief, mirrors the challenges highlighted by Guler and Berman (2019) and Bhugra (2004). Acculturation's psychological distresses, including identity loss and mental health concerns, are corroborated by the participants' experiences, emphasizing the need for supportive interventions like participatory art.

Findings within most themes, but particularly Identity Formation and Autobiographical Reasoning align with Martone and Çili (2024), as well as the literature on autobiographical reasoning explored in the literature review





*Traces: Stories of Migration.*  
Portraits by Lucy Orta exhibited  
at LCF, UAL East Bank.  
Photography Jack Elliot Edwards

section of this research. The participants' engagement with storytelling and revisiting their migration narratives seemed to facilitate a new and deeper understanding of their origins. The role of textile craft, particularly making Story Cloths, in providing tangible connections to migration narratives, resonates with the literature on meaning-making, identity development, and stress reduction through creative activities (Malchiodi, 2002). The research findings extend the understanding of how participatory art, specifically textile-based practices, may positively influence the mental health of migrants by providing avenues for autobiographical reasoning and self-event connections.

Socially engaged practices, discussed in the literature, find real-world application in the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project. The collaborative nature of socially engaged art, focusing on human interaction and social discourse, aligns with the Shared Identity and Collective Empowerment theme. The participants expressed how the project fostered a sense of belonging and understanding within the workshop, countering feelings of alienation—a sentiment also highlighted in the literature. The reciprocal nature of skill-sharing and peer support further underscored the importance of collective creativity in personal growth and emotional health. These findings shed light on the potential of participatory art, to bridge gaps between different community members, and echo the literature on fostering appreciation for migrant cultures.

Moreover, the analysis revealed that workshops facilitated a collaborative, inclusive, and interactive approach. The emphasis on the process over the resulting artworks, shared experiences, and democratizing the creative process aligns with the participatory nature of the research initiative. The convergence of the historical narrative of migration within the fashion

and textile industry and the contemporary findings of the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project highlights the enduring influence of migration on creative practices.

It is important to note that there were limitations to this research. For example, the small number of participants and the qualitative nature of the study mean that the findings cannot be generalized to migrant populations involved in creative practices. Furthermore, the study relied only on participants' experiences and subjective evaluations of the workshops and their impact on well-being. Because there was no objective assessment of well-being or mental health before and after the workshops, we need to be cautious in interpreting the findings. Additionally, while experienced in qualitative research, the interviewers lacked professional training. This potential for leading questions could have influenced the results.

---

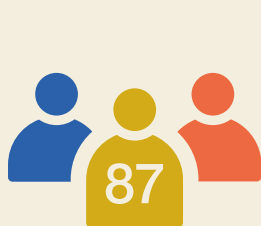
The lessons learned emphasize the ongoing importance of utilizing participatory art to promote inclusivity, resilience, and a more connected society, fostering both community and individual self-expression through visualizations like Story Cloths.

Despite the limitations, there are implications of these findings for participatory art initiatives. The study underscores the transformative potential of creative expression, especially in the form of storytelling and textile-based practices, as a means of navigating the complex landscape of migration. Beyond individual self-discovery, the communal engagement facilitated by projects like *Traces: Stories of Migration* holds promise for enhancing the well-being of migrant populations. Participatory creative practices and textile crafts, as illustrated in this study, can serve as powerful storytelling devices to visualize the movement of people. The creation of Story Cloths emerged as a tangible and visual representation of individual migration narratives. These artefacts not only encapsulate personal stories but also become a collective visual archive, contributing to a broader understanding of the diverse journeys within the migrant community.

In conclusion, this study contributes to understanding migration's impact and the potential of participatory art as a tool for navigating identity complexities, fostering community bonds, and challenging societal narratives. The findings highlight that the artistic process devised by Lucy Orta, particularly through participatory creative practices and textile crafts, can influence migrants' self-concept and well-being. Through the *Traces: Stories of Migration* project participatory art emerges as an important tool, offering individuals the space to navigate their migrant identities, form meaningful community connections, and contribute to a broader understanding of migration experiences. The lessons learned emphasize the ongoing importance of utilizing participatory art to promote inclusivity, resilience, and a more connected society, fostering both community and individual self-expression through visualizations like Story Cloths.

# Outcomes and Impact of *Traces: Stories of Migration*

## Community engagement



participants



countries represented



community centres



workshops

## Student engagement



students



courses



curriculum projects



extra-curricular experience



dissertation collaboration



paid undergraduate  
work placements



graduate paid employment

## Creative and research outputs



new works



story cloths



community  
portraits



collection  
of poetry



documentary  
film



qualitative  
evaluation

## Exhibitions



public gallery  
exhibitions



community-based  
showcases



exhibition  
visitors

## Delivery



project partners



creative  
practitioners

1. Introduction
  2. Literature Review
  3. The Study Aims
  4. Method
  5. Results and Discussion
  6. Conclusions
- References**

# References

- Adoni- Kroyanker, M., Regev, D., Snir, S., Orkibi, H., & Shakarov, I. (2018). Practices and challenges in implementing art therapy in the school system. *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 24(1), 40–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17454832.2018.1536726>
- Akthar, Z., & Lovell, A. (2018). Art therapy with refugee children: A qualitative study explored through the lens of art therapists and their experiences. *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 24(3), 139–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17454832.2018.1533571>
- Aliakbari, M. A., & Elham, F. (2011). Basic Principles of Critical Pedagogy. In *2nd International Conference on Humanities, Historical and Social Sciences* (Vol. 17, pp. 77–85). essay, IACSIT Press. Retrieved September 2024, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266224451\\_Basic\\_Principles\\_of\\_Critical\\_Pedagogy](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266224451_Basic_Principles_of_Critical_Pedagogy).
- Beck, L. A. (1992). Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 24(1), 93–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.1992.11969876>
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 46(1), 5–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Berry, J. W. (2015). Acculturation. In J. E. Grusec & P. D. Hastings (Eds.), *Handbook of socialization: Theory and research* (pp. 520–538). The Guilford Press.
- Berry, J. W., & Sam, D. L. (2016). Theoretical perspectives. *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*, 11–29. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781316219218.003>
- Bhugra, D. (2004). Migration and Mental Health. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 109(4), 243–258. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0001-690x.2003.00246.x>
- Bhugra, Dinesh, & Becker, M. (2005). Migration, cultural bereavement and cultural identity. *World Psychiatry: Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association*, 4(1), 18–24.
- Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Verso.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Burnett, J. (2017). Racial violence and the Brexit State. *Race & Class*, 58(4), 85–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396816686283>
- Cheatham, L. (2023, November 23). *Long-term International Migration, Provisional: Year ending June 2023*. Office for National Statistics. [https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingjune2023#:~:text=1.-,Main%20points,%20and%20British%20\(84%2C000\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/yearendingjune2023#:~:text=1.-,Main%20points,%20and%20British%20(84%2C000)).
- Choy, B., Arunachalam, K., S, G., Taylor, M., & Lee, A. (2021). Systematic review: Acculturation strategies and their impact on the mental health of migrant populations. *Public Health in Practice*, 2, 100069. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2020.100069>
- Cox, M., Brockbank, P., Pines, M., & Theilgaard, A. (2007). *Mutative metaphors in psychotherapy: The aeolian mode*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE.
- Dieterich-Hartwell, R., & Koch, S. (2017). Creative arts therapies as temporary home for refugees: Insights from literature and Practice. *Behavioral Sciences*, 7(4), 69. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs7040069>
- Dodgson, J. E. (2019). Reflexivity in qualitative research. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 35(2), 220–222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0890334419830990>
- Fazel, M. (2002). The Mental Health of Refugee Children. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 87(5), 366–370. <https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.87.5.366>
- Finkelpearl, T., Kester, G. H., & Bishop, C. (2013). *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*. Duke University Press.
- Gil, A. G., Vega, W. A., & Dimas, J. M. (1994). Acculturative stress and personal adjustment among Hispanic adolescent boys. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 22(1), 43–54. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629\(199401\)22:1<43::aid-jcop2290220106>gt;3.0.co;2-t](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(199401)22:1<43::aid-jcop2290220106>gt;3.0.co;2-t)
- Goodman, S. (2017). “Take Back Control of Our Borders”: The Role of Arguments about Controlling Immigration in the Brexit Debate. *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, 15(3), 35–53.
- Guler, J., & Berman, S. L. (2019). Acculturation, identity distress, and internalizing symptoms among resettled adolescent refugees. *Journal of Adolescence*, 76(1), 129–138. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.07.016>
- Habermas, T. (2011). Autobiographical reasoning: Arguing and narrating from a biographical perspective. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2011(131), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.285>
- Habermas, T., & Bluck, S. (2000). Getting a life: The emergence of the life story in adolescence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(5), 748–769. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.126.5.748>
- Hasan, S. I., Yee, A., Rinaldi, A., Azham, A. A., Mohd Hairi, F., & Amer Nordin, A. S. (2021). Prevalence of common mental health issues among migrant workers: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS ONE*, 16(12). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0260221>
- Helguera, P. (2011). *Education for socially engaged art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. Jorge Pinto Books.
- Howie, P., Prasad, S., & Kristel, J. (2013). *Using art therapy with diverse populations: Crossing cultures and abilities*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- IOM. (2019). *About migration*. International Organization for Migration. <https://www.iom.int/about-migration>
- Kapitan, L., Litell, M., & Torres, A. (2011). Creative art therapy in a community's participatory research and Social Transformation. *Art Therapy*, 28(2), 64–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2011.578238>
- Kay, A. (2000). Art and Community Development: The role the arts have in regenerating communities. *Community Development Journal*, 35(4), 414–424. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/35.4.414>
- Kelly, M. (2014). *Encyclopedia of aesthetics*. Oxford University Press.



- Martone, S., & Çili, S. (2024). *Exploration of participation in a narrative textile workshop and migrants' sense of self and well-being*. Manuscript in preparation.
- Malchiodi, C. (2003). Art Therapy and the Brain. In *Handbook of Art Therapy* (pp. 16–24). essay, The Guilford Press.
- Matsumoto, D. R., & Juang, L. P. (2023). *Culture and psychology* (7th ed.). Cengage.
- McAdams, D. P. (1998). *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*. The Guilford Press.
- McAdams, D. P. (2020). McAdams, Dan P. *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*, 2805–2812. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24612-3\\_2229](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24612-3_2229)
- McNeil, R. (2024, December 2). Net migration to the UK. *Migration Observatory*. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/>
- Montgomery, E. (2008). Long-term effects of organized violence on young Middle Eastern refugees' mental health. *Social Science & Medicine*, 67(10), 1596–1603. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2008.07.020>
- Pearlin, L. I., & Schooler, C. (1978). The structure of coping. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 19(1), 2. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2136319>
- Pöllänen, S. (2015). Elements of crafts that enhance well-being. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 47(1), 58–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2015.11950351>
- Rong, X. L., & Fitchett, P. (2008). Socialization and Identity Transformation of Black Immigrant Youth in the United States. *Theory Into Practice*, 47(1), 35–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405840701764714>
- Rose, E., Bingley, A., Rioseco, M., & Lamb, K. (2018). *Art of recovery: Displacement, mental health, and Wellbeing*. Arts, 7(4), 94. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts7040094>
- Sarantakos, S. (2012). *Social Research*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
- Thomson, R. (2020, June 25). [How immigration shapes UK fashion](https://www.drapersonline.com/people/how-immigration-shapes-uk-fashion#:~:text=Over%20the%20longer%20term%2C%20curtailing,(see%20box%2C%20below).). Drapers. [https://www.drapersonline.com/people/how-immigration-shapes-uk-fashion#:~:text=Over%20the%20longer%20term%2C%20curtailing,\(see%20box%2C%20below\).](https://www.drapersonline.com/people/how-immigration-shapes-uk-fashion#:~:text=Over%20the%20longer%20term%2C%20curtailing,(see%20box%2C%20below).)
- Tseklevs, E., Bingley, A. F., Luján Escalante, M. A., & Gradinar, A. (2018). Engaging people with dementia in designing playful and creative practices: Co-design or co-creation? *Dementia*, 19(3), 915–931. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1471301218791692>
- Tsirir, G., Pavlicevic, M., & Farrant, C. (2014). *A guide to evaluation for Arts Therapists and Arts & Health Practitioners*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Turner, C. (2021, February 3). *Brexit, migration, and the fashion industry: Eco-age*. Eco. <https://eco-age.com/resources/brexit-migration-and-fashion-industry/>
- United Nations. (2023, November). *International migration*. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/migration#:~:text=Some%20people%20move%20in%20search,disasters%20or%20other%20environmental%20factors.>
- Uttley, L., Stevenson, M., Scope, A., Rawdin, A., & Sutton, A. (2015). The clinical and cost-effectiveness of group art therapy for people with non-psychotic mental health disorders: A systematic review and cost-effectiveness analysis. *BMC Psychiatry*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-015-0528-4>
- World Health Organisation. (2023, October 10). *Five key themes for improved mental health care for refugees and migrants*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news/item/10-10-2023-five-key-themes-for-improved-mental-health-care-for-refugees-and-migrants>
- Wu, Q., Ge, T., Emond, A., Foster, K., Gatt, J. M., Hadfield, K., Mason-Jones, A. J., Reid, S., Theron, L., Ungar, M., & Woudes, T. A. (2018). Acculturation, resilience, and the mental health of migrant youth: A cross-country comparative study. *Public Health*, 162, 63–70. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2018.05.006>

## About the Authors

**Natasha Fulton** is a dedicated media strategist specializing in strategic communications, with a primary focus on addressing pressing global issues such as the climate emergency, human rights, social justice, and the Sustainable Development Goals. With previous experience in planning and executing global media campaigns for film clients and localized music events, Natasha brings a wealth of expertise to her work.

She holds an MSc from London College of Fashion in Applied Psychology of Fashion, complemented by a psychology BSc from University College London. During her academic pursuits, Natasha concentrated on applied decision-making, advocating for change in the fashion industry by championing a circular economy and sustainable consumption practices. Natasha's diverse background in media strategy and impactful research positions her as a valuable contributor, applying psychological methods to her projects.

**Professor Lucy Orta** is a visual artist with a socially engaged practice spanning three decades. Lucy has held the Chair of Art and the Environment at the University of the Arts London since 2013, she is a member of the university's Centre for Sustainable Fashion (CSF) and Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAiN). Her practice research investigates the interrelations between the individual body and community structures, exploring their diverse identities and means of cohabitation. She uses the mediums of drawing, textiles, photography, film and performance to realise singular bodies of work that include *Refuge Wear* and *Body Architecture*, portable and autonomous habitats that reflect on issues of mobility and human survival; *Nexus Architecture*, clothing and accessories that shape modular and collective bodies through the metaphor of the social link; and *Lifeguard*, wearable structures that portray both human vulnerability and resilience. Lucy has developed projects with a wide range of vulnerable groups such as prison residents, refugees and asylum seekers, homeless and care hostel residents. Recent projects *Traces: Stories of Migration* and *Banner Processions* incorporate participatory and inclusive methods that empower participants through creative practice. Her artwork has been exhibited globally in contemporary art museums and biennales and it can be found in public and private collections.

Supported by





