

## Boxed: Exploring Containment and Resilience in Times of Crisis

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### ABSTRACT

This article draws upon materials created between May and July 2020 as part of an artistic collaboration between the two authors which took place during the first COVID-19 lockdown. The authors worked together remotely, drawing on their personal and professional experiences to explore the themes of identity, migration and belonging in times of crisis. One of the strongest themes to emerge from the collaboration was the importance of individual and collective resistance to the deeply gendered social and political categories that 'box us in', and serve constantly to remind us of our place and how we should – and shouldn't – behave and be. As mothers, grandmothers and wives. As migrants, artists and academics. And as women.

**Keywords:** gender, identity, categories, resilience, arts, migration

### INTRODUCTION

This article draws upon materials created as part of an artist collaboration between the two authors entitled *The Artist and The Professor: The Mother and the Wife*, which took place between May and July 2020 during the first COVID-19 lockdown. Laura Nyahuye and Heaven Crawley are, respectively, an artist and a research professor who, at the time of the project, were working for organisations based in the city of Coventry, UK. Laura is a creative visionary. Her body of work is about stories, stories that challenge perceptions to do with migration, to do with women, stories that celebrate women. Summoning her craft as a storyteller, Laura's work echoes and weaves together stories, journeys and experiences lived creating a rich palette and a tapestry of textures and perspectives. Each piece is an artefact embodying the voices, the ancestry and the daily lived realities of migrant women and communities. Heaven is a white, female professor who has undertaken research with and for refugees and other migrants for more than thirty years, focusing in particular on the ways in which gender shapes the experience of migration, and the intersection of gender with race, class, age and other aspects of identity. Heaven is a mother, a grandmother, a pilot and a cook. She was born in the UK but lives in Italy.

Whilst we might appear to have little in common, the COVID-19 lockdowns that started in the UK and Italy in March 2020, provided us with an opportunity to draw together our personal and professional experiences in order to reflect on issues of identity, migration, resilience and hope in times of crisis. One of the strongest themes to emerge from this collaboration is our individual and collective resistance to the social and political categories that 'box us in', that serve constantly to remind us of our place and how we should – and shouldn't – behave and be.

As mothers.

As grandmothers.

As wives.

As migrants.

As people from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

As people from different professional backgrounds.

As women.

At seemingly every turn, we are required to comply with the expectations of others. These different identities interact and intersect with one another in complex ways. What does it mean to negotiate identities such as being a Black woman? A white woman? A teenage mum? A female artist? A female professor? What expectations are

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placed upon us? Which of these identities do we take on and allow to shape who we are? Which do we push against, and resist?

Categories, and the expectations around them, also affect refugees and migrants, the people that we work with, through our artistic practices and research. For them, the expectations and assumptions of others – lawyers and judges, policy makers and politicians – about what it means to be a ‘refugee’ or a ‘migrant’ have real and often serious consequences. Fitting a box, an administrative or policy category can mean the difference between being allowed to stay or being required to leave. Between being with your family or separated from them indefinitely. Between having rights and opportunities or being made destitute or detained. Between being alive or dead. Like all categories, the legal and policy categories that shape the lives of those who move are deeply contested, reflecting who asks the questions, whose story is heard, who has a voice. And what colour or nationality we are. Whilst some people are able to move with relative ease, waved through immigration controls without questions or visas, the experiences of others are very different. From the Windrush scandal<sup>1</sup> to the Mediterranean ‘migration crisis’<sup>2</sup>, the ability to move is deeply racialised.

This article presents some of our exchanges and artistic outputs which reflect on the ways in which categories are often harnessed by others – and sometimes by ourselves – with the purpose of making us feel ‘out of place’ or ‘displaced in place’. We invite readers to explore our website<sup>3</sup> in order to understand how the different themes and aspects of our exchange relate to one another – as indeed they do in life. For the purposes of this article, we have organised our artistic outputs around three themes, *Boxed*<sup>4</sup>, *Cracked*<sup>5</sup> and *Resilience*<sup>6</sup>, each of which includes a selection of poems and images, which capture our conversations and reflections. In the poems *Blackness* and *Whiteness*, for example, we reflect on the racialised layering of our identities as two women – one of whom is white, one of whom is black. In *Shoes I* and *Shoes II*, we explore the ways in which people have tried to label us from a very early age, shaping the people we have become. In *Cracked but not broken* and *Crushed but not defeated*, we acknowledge the pain that we have experienced but also our determination not to allow these life experiences to break us. The final three pieces – *Bend like the trees*, *No apologies* and *Magumbo* – capture our resilience and refusal to submit to other people’s expectations of us or apologise for the people we are or want to be. We conclude the article by offering up some reflections on how these types of artistic collaborations, conducted entirely through digital technologies in the context of a global pandemic, have the potential not only to help us identify more clearly the commonality of our experiences despite our seeming differences, and for building new forms of solidarities across categories and borders.

## OUR COLLABORATION

The COVID-19 lockdown of 2020 provided us with an opportunity to draw together our personal and professional experiences, and reflect on issues of migration, resilience and hope in times of crisis. Individually and through conversations with each another by email, WhatsApp and Zoom, we took the opportunity provided by the lockdown to explore our shared experiences as women, wives, (grand)mothers and survivors of hardship and domestic violence. In the process of these conversations, we produced a series of creative outputs (prose, drawings, body adornment, photography, video) which explore the ways in which our own and societal expectations of gendered and racialised roles and responsibilities have shaped our lives. By sharing our experiences – often in very frank and explicit ways – we highlight the ways in which, as women, we can come together to push against the categories that limit individual and collective possibilities for change.

The fact that this collaboration happened at all was, like so many things in life, a matter of chance. We met at the Rising Global Peace Forum<sup>7</sup> held at Coventry Cathedral in November 2019. Laura was attending the event as

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<sup>1</sup> The Windrush scandal began in 2018 and involved the wrongful detention and deportation of people who were born in the UK, to parents who arrived from the Caribbean. These people are often referred to as the ‘Windrush generation’ after the name of the ship that brought one of the first groups of West Indian immigrants to the UK in 1948.

<sup>2</sup> The Mediterranean ‘migration crisis’ refers to the arrival of more than million people who arrived on the shores of Europe in 2015, often fleeing conflict, violence and insecurity from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Eritrea. It refers as much to the political crisis across seen across Europe in 2015/16 in response to this migration as it does to the experiences of refugees and migrants themselves.

<sup>3</sup> All of the artistic outputs can be found on our project website, which also includes voice recordings of some of the prose included in this article. See <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/boxed/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/cracked/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/resilience/>

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.risingforum.org>

a speaker and exhibitor with her beautiful collection of body adornments<sup>8</sup>. Heaven was attending to speak about her work as Director of the MIDEQ Hub<sup>9</sup>, which explores the relationships between migration and inequality in the context of the Global South. Our conversation was fleeting but we subsequently exchanged emails and met again in February 2020. Although we had only been able to meet in person for a few hours before the COVID-19 lockdown began, we both felt certain that we would work together when the time was right.

Ironically, for all of its many, many challenges, it was COVID-19 itself that created that opportunity. The lockdown brought with it the opportunity to spend time in one place, to *Stop*<sup>10</sup>. It created time and space for both of us to breathe, to reflect on our respective challenges and achievements and to explore new ways of thinking about ourselves and our relationships with others. It took us on a unique, inspiring and though-provoking journey. Intense. Challenging at times. But full of excitement and laughter and the pure pleasure of connecting with another human being to share ideas, think and talk, write and make.

## ON METHODS AND OUR WAYS OF WORKING

When an opportunity arose to apply for a small amount of university funding (£2k) to support collaboration between researchers and artists as part of *Coventry Creates*<sup>11</sup>, we felt compelled to grab with both hands. *The Artist and the Professor, the Mother and the Wife* began in the middle of May 2020, mid-way through the COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK and Italy where each of us lives, and was completed by the end of July 2020.

When we first started working together we didn't actually have a concrete plan as to how the project would evolve.

We knew we wanted to work together.

We knew we had things to say.

But we didn't really know each other.

And we had never worked together before.

So we trusted our instincts and started to communicate.

At first, we wrote letters to each other by email. We talked about how we were finding the lockdown. About the things that were important to us. The things that make us think. Some of these initial exchanges are included as outputs from our collaboration because they provide the backdrop, the context, within which the creative pieces emerged. For example, in *Letter to Heaven*<sup>12</sup>, Laura reflects on our conversations and the article written by Heaven about the ways in which categories are used to control refugees and other migrants and to limit their possibilities (Crawley and Skleparis, 2017). Through these initial exchanges we came to realise that there were significant commonalities in our experiences, our relationships (especially with the men in our lives) and in our feelings of being 'boxed in' by the expectations of others, of society – and of ourselves (**Figure 1**).

We then started to exchange prose and poems about how we saw ourselves and our place in the world. Once the similarities in our ways of thinking and writing about the world became clear – and it happened very quickly – the conversation became intense. Emails and images, WhatsApp messages and emoticons went back and forth, a flurry of exchanges and ideas. The interweaving of our personal and professional lives was reflected in our poetry. As our work progressed we felt increasingly comfortable with the process of co-production, trusting that one person would not deliberately choose to misrepresent the other's feeling or experiences. And that where there were differences of understanding this would simply lead to a deeper exploration of our experiences. A gentle inquisitive probing, not a push or a poke. We started to weave together our words and ideas, literally cutting and gluing sentences together<sup>13</sup> (**Figure 2**).

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<sup>8</sup> Our project website contains a large number of artistic outputs and reflections not included in this article. More at <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/>

<sup>9</sup> More at [www.mideq.org](http://www.mideq.org)

<sup>10</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/03/stop/>

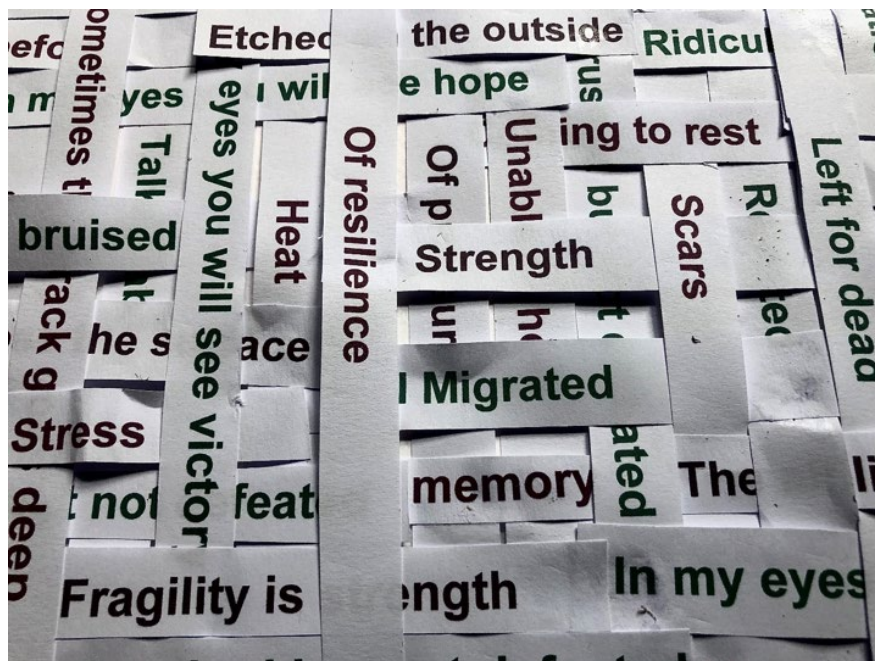
<sup>11</sup> *Coventry Creates* was a project established by Coventry and Warwick universities in the lead up to and during Coventry being the UK City of Culture in 2021. The University Partnership funded over 60 creative research projects, involving many diverse Coventry organisations and local communities and hosted many of the outputs, included some of those produced through our collaboration, on its project website. More at <https://coventrycreates.co.uk>

<sup>12</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/20/letter-to-heaven/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/16/weaving-words/>



**Figure 1.** Categorical fetishism. Italy, 2020. Photograph by Heaven Crawley. Used with permission



**Figure 2.** Weaving words. Italy, 2020. Photograph by Heaven Crawley. Used with permission

The energy in our conversations was always exiting and inspiring. Our weekly Zoom chats were loud and filled with laughter.

But there were tough times too.

Times when the pressure of the deadline or the ethics application or the need to ‘produce’ stifled our creativity and ability to communicate. To trust each other and what we wanted/needed from the collaboration rather than simply react or respond to another agenda or pressing need. Times when the challenges of personal relationships, of motherhood, of being ‘Zoomed out’ sapped our energy and made it difficult for us to focus on what were already difficult and complex personal issues.

But we never stopped communicating.

Never stopped trusting each other.

Never stopped believing that our ways of working would produce beautiful and thought-provoking outputs because of our individual and collective commitment to the work, the ideas behind them and each other.

By the end of the project, we felt able to co-produce work in a way that neither of us had imagined or planned for when we started the project. *Coming together*<sup>14</sup> was intended as a reflection on the nature of our collaboration and the ways in which our lives and ways of thinking had become intimately connected. One person provided the other with the last word of a sentence she had written and the other responded using the first word as the start of what she wanted to say. Neither of us had any idea of what had been written by the other until we read our words to one another. The synergies and connections between the lines reflect the synergies and connections that developed between us as the project evolved.

## **BOXED**

### ***Boxed In* by Heaven Crawley<sup>15</sup>**

You want to put me in a box  
Tell me what I am  
And what I am not

But I am me

I am strong  
'Pushy'

I am kind  
'Weak'

I am vulnerable  
'Needy'

I am White  
'Black'

I am passionate  
'A kid on a gap year'

You see what you want to see  
You see who you want me to be  
But I am all of these things

At the same time  
At different times

I am me  
And my box is big enough  
To hold me  
Not contain me  
To protect me  
Not limit me

And if I need a bigger box  
A different box  
I will find one

You cannot box me in  
I will not allow myself to be put in your box  
I am me

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<sup>14</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/17/coming-together/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/20/boxed-in/>

**Blackness by Laura Nyahuye<sup>16</sup>**

*Identity a crisis in modern day society*

*Identity a tug of war, tugging with self, tugging with the other*

*Identity the knowing of self*

Allowing circumstance to define who we are can possibly be the worst catastrophe to happen is one's life. Whatever the circumstance is, be it good or bad circumstance. It must not define us!

Inside each and every one of us, there's a still small voice, that guides us, if we INTENTIONALLY ignore the everyday noise and INTENTIONALLY take time to listen within. I personally call it the voice of God guiding me. Listening to the voice within, is a gift guide us

We are living in a fast-paced world, with a mix bag of voices competing to be heard and it can be easy to succumb to a false identity

I often find myself tangled up in ready-made labels. 'She must look like this, she ought to dress like so.'

As a black woman before I open my mouth, assumptions are already in waiting. I constantly find myself tumbling across, befitting identity. Pigeon-holed to certain topics, mindsets. Pigeon-holed to a square.

Anyway, how do you fit a square into a circle

Red blood running through our veins... #tauratinzwe

#allhuman #lovewins (Figure 3)



**Figure 3.** Blackness being human. UK, 2020. Photograph by Laura Nyahuye. Used with permission

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<sup>16</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/16/blackness/>

**Whiteness by Heaven Crawley<sup>17</sup>**

The privilege of whiteness  
Is never having to think about  
The colour of my skin

Never having to walk down the street  
With my sleeves pulled down over my hands  
To stop the names  
The stares  
The spit  
Of those that pass

The privilege of whiteness  
Is never having to worry  
That my son will be stopped  
For no reason  
Keep his mouth shut  
But not too shut  
Comply  
Or potentially die

The privilege of whiteness  
Is never having to wonder  
Whether the job I wanted  
Never came  
Because of my name  
My history  
Because of who I am  
The discomfort of others  
The awkward glances  
The 'race card'  
The privilege of whiteness  
Is the right to be offended  
Upset  
Angry  
If that privilege is questioned  
Or even mentioned

The right to be offended that the hurt and pain of others  
The insults  
The racism  
The violence  
Could be more important than the gravestone of a dog called 'Nigger'

The privilege of whiteness  
Is knowing that I can walk through a border  
More easily than a woman from the country next door  
Wave my passport  
Show my face  
Smile  
And it's enough  
Because the privilege of whiteness will protect me  
Keep me safe

The privilege of whiteness  
Is the refusal to see it  
Acknowledge it

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<sup>17</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/16/whiteness/>

Hear it  
See it  
Check it  
To deny the reality of others  
Even when that reality means  
Blood  
And sweat  
And tears  
To dismiss those who fight the injustices  
As snowflakes  
Fake news  
Political correctness gone mad

The privilege of whiteness  
Follows me  
Wherever I go  
A blanket of security  
Self knowing  
Self worth

The privilege of whiteness  
Is never having to think about  
The colour of my skin ([Figure 4](#))



**Figure 4.** Whiteness. Italy, 2020. Photography by Heaven Crawley. Used with permission



*Shoes I* by Heaven Crawley<sup>18</sup>

I remember those shoes  
Blue  
Shiny  
With a silver band

Hand down shoes for the poor kid  
The pikey kid  
The gypo kid

An act of kindness  
Reminding me that I am different  
Not the same

Dress up  
Shape up

Be like us

But I cannot  
Will not

Be like you

My difference is my weakness  
And also my strength

I take the shoes  
Play the game  
Do what I need to do  
To survive

But it's my difference  
That makes me thrive  
Makes me alive  
Makes me

Me ([Figure 5](#))

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<sup>18</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/18/shoes/>



**Figure 5.** Shoes I. Italy, 2020. Photograph by Heaven Crawley. Used with permission

*Shoes II* by Laura Nyahuye <sup>19</sup>

I remember the dress, pleated, floral  
I remember staring...  
Sandwiched between them,  
I remember the rumbling of their voices in fervent prayer

‘Prayer of the righteous availeth much’

I remember them standing there  
Sitting there  
Kneeling there  
Watching, watching, waiting

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<sup>19</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/18/shoes-2/>

‘Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength’

I remember the slamming of the door  
The cracking wine glass  
The snapping of the jaw  
door banging  
door cracking  
door snapping

‘Greater is He that is in me than he who is in the world’

I remember the heat of the sun  
the drumming of the heart  
the trees, the warm soil,  
feet denting the soil  
as if to prove their existence

‘He in me, me in Him’

I remember my sweet tiny, black, buckled, leather shoes. So cute (Figure 6)



Figure 6. Shoes II. Italy, 2020. Photography by Laura Nyahuye. Used with permission

## CRACKED

### *Cracked by Heaven* Crawley<sup>20</sup>

We are all cracked, damaged in some way by the experiences of our past.

Our experiences of hurt, pain and fear shape who we are and our relationships with others. Some of these cracks run deep, fracturing our sense of self. Some are caused by experiences beyond our control...the unexpected death of a close friend, tragic events that leave us feeling helpless. Others lead us to question our (in)actions, our complicity and, ultimately, ourselves...abusive family relationships, the beating sustained at the hands of a partner, the unravelling of an idea, a dream. These deep cracks are accompanied by other seemingly more superficial ones...an unkind word from a friend, a complicated relationship, a stupid mistake. The cracks crisscross and reinforce each other in sometimes difficult and unexpected ways.

As women we know only too well that being honest and open about our experiences – the cracks – will often lead others to judge us. Gendered judgement comes hard and fast, often framed rhetorically to make us question ourselves:

‘I was a teenage mother’ = ‘Were you stupid, after a free house or just a slut?’

‘Sometimes he used to hit me’ = ‘Why did you let him do that to you? Why didn’t you just leave him?’

So we cover cracks, hide the pain. And for good reason. If others see the cracks they might see them as weakness, exploit them, take advantage of our vulnerability. We present ourselves as strong, capable, invincible even at those times when inside we feel anything but.

As we get older we start to understand that the cracks do not mean that we are broken. They are an integral part of **who** we are and **how** we are. And if the people that we care about can’t see the cracks, our vulnerabilities, then they can’t see us or know us for who we are. And we, in turn, can’t truly know ourselves.

The Japanese art of *kintsugi* is a repair method that honours the artifact’s unique history by emphasising, not hiding, the break. Rather than rejoin ceramic pieces with a camouflaged adhesive, the *kintsugi* technique employs a special tree sap lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. This method celebrates each artefact’s unique history by emphasising its fractures and breaks instead of hiding or disguising them. In fact, *kintsugi* often makes the repaired piece even more beautiful than the original, revitalising it with a new look and giving it a second life.

The symbolism of *kintsugi* has been written about extensively (see, for example, Santini, 2018). For us, the art of *kintsugi* is a metaphor for resilience. What we imagine to be broken and beyond repair becomes something even more beautiful when the cracks are brought to the fore and made visible.

This has profound implications for how we chose to live our lives.

The important message behind *kintsugi* is that it can support the healing process. Your cracks are your strength not your weakness. They make you more beautiful, not less.

They make you who you are.

### *Cracked but not broken by Heaven* Crawley<sup>21</sup>

Each crack tells a story  
Of pressure  
Heat  
Stress  
Unable to hold  
Unable to bend

Sometimes the crack  
Darts across the surface  
Chasing the contours  
Coming to rest  
At an edge

A mark  
A memory  
Etched on the outside

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<sup>20</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/09/27/cracked/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/15/cracked-but-not-broken/>

Sometimes the crack goes deep  
Scars  
Impossible to hide

Each crack tells a story  
Of resilience  
Strength  
The ability to withstand pressure  
Heat  
Stress

And emerge more beautiful  
Than before

Fragility is strength  
Resilience is beauty

Cracked  
But not broken

***Crushed but not defeated* by Laura Nyahuye<sup>22</sup>**

I Migrated  
Migration is only a snapshot of my story  
This is an on-going story  
Daily it's being written  
There's so much more  
Crushed but not defeated

I've been crushed  
I've been bruised  
Talked about  
Ridiculed  
Rejected  
Left for dead  
Crushed but not defeated!

In my eyes you will see hope  
In my eyes you will see resilience  
In my eyes you will see victory  
Crushed but not defeated!

**RESILIENCE**

***No apologies* by Laura Nyahuye<sup>23</sup>**

No! I will not apologise  
Does it offend you?

Don't clip my wings  
Category this  
Category that  
Ethnicity  
Blackness  
Whiteness  
Colourless

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<sup>22</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/16/crushed-but-not-defeated/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/16/no-apologies/>

Don't clip wings  
I have no desire to fit in  
No Apologies

Born to be free  
Born to be me  
Born to thrive not strive!  
Don't clip my wings  
Category A  
Category B  
Ability  
Disability  
Born to be free  
Born to be me  
No desire to fit in  
I am Me  
For this I will not apologise (Figure 7 and Figure 8)



**Figure 7.** *Urikuenedepi?* UK, 2020. Photography by John Whitmore. Used with permission



**Figure 8.** Aluta continua! UK, 2020. Photography by John Whitmore. Used with permission

***Bend like the trees* by Heaven Crawley<sup>24</sup>**

When the storm approaches  
Bend like the trees

You are strong  
Resilient  
Flexible  
And you will survive

You will be different  
A little bent out of shape  
But beautiful  
In a different way

When the storm arrives  
Lean into the loneliness  
The unknown spaces  
The fear

For if you resist  
And try to fight it  
You will crack  
Splinter  
And fall

Bend like the trees when the storm arrives  
For there are other trees around you  
And they will shelter you  
Protect you  
Keep you safe

The storm will pass  
As it always does  
The sun will shine  
As it always does

And you will be left standing

***Magumbo* by Laura Nyahuye<sup>25</sup>**

Totem: Magumbo  
Character traits  
Magumbo anopenga.  
Haaite zvekutamba  
A lioness  
A fighter  
Don't do it!  
Who am I?

I am a child of God  
A daughter  
A mother  
A sister  
friend,  
colleague,  
artist

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<sup>24</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/16/bend-like-the-trees/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/16/magumbo/>



Magumbo?  
I am so MANY things

I roar  
I meow  
I howl  
Sometimes my blood boils so hot I feel like WONDER Woman,  
cum Super woman  
cum Laura,  
cum, Lioness

I roar  
Laugh so hard, tears uncontrollably roll down my cheeks  
I roar

hurt so hard  
cried so hard  
peanut brain spins with confusion  
and awe,  
whispers  
how did you survive that?  
Magumbo?

tummy, heart,  
Lungs, kidneys, every organ,  
spirit, intricate details of my being  
Rumbles  
It can only be God...

So...  
you were saying...  
The voice tone,  
Picks you up by the arms  
Arms above your head  
And a warmth, some vibration brews up somewhere in your mwongo  
Then your Lungs contract and expand  
You find yourself there...

There...  
where it all started

You mean the voice, the tone takes you  
There?  
Picks you up by the arms  
Arms above your head  
And a warmth, some vibration brews up somewhere in your mwongo  
Then your Lungs contract and expand  
You find yourself there

I see...  
You are bitter... (Figure 9)



**Figure 9.** Magumbo. UK, 2020. Photography by John Whitmore. Used with permission

## **REFLECTIONS**

There are very few opportunities in life for dialogic collaborations such as this one in which work and relationships are able to develop organically because we have time. So much is driven by a deadline, a target, a box within which we've already put ourselves – or been put by others. A box that shapes the questions we ask, the ways we ask the questions and what we produce. For us, there are many lessons to be learnt from this way of working. This is our first attempt to document it so that others might take from it what is useful for them in their own work and practice.

So, what have we learnt about ourselves? About each other? About the ways in which we communicate and share ideas around migration and identity in times of crisis?

One of the strong themes emerging from this collaboration was the ways in which categories serve to ‘flatten out’ and oversimplify our multiple identities.

Categories are important as a means of organising the social world in which we live and we will never be able to get rid of them. The problem is not categories *per se* but rather the fact that not all categories are equally recognised or valued. The differential value assigned by society to different categories is rooted in power and deep-seated inequalities. Categories are not natural, neutral or simply descriptive. They are highly value-laden and they have consequences, particularly for those for whom these categories determine access to social/legal protection and rights.

For us too, categories have consequences. They open up some opportunities whilst closing down others, sometimes simultaneously. The privileges of being white can intersect with poverty and hetero-patriarchy in ways that limit the opportunities of women everywhere. For Black women the inequalities of being female can intersect with race and poverty in even more complex ways. It is perhaps not surprising that the idea of intersectionality, coined and elaborated by the brilliant Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017) was ever present in our discussions.

Through our artistic engagements and practices we were able to engage with parts of our identities as women that have shaped our lives and careers but typically have often had to be buried deep in the interests of others – children, partners, family, work.

This collaboration did not intentionally set out to explore how creative approaches can facilitate work with refugees and other migrants. And neither are the authors refugees themselves. However, as migrants with a deep professional and personal experience of working with those who are forced to move, we were able to see parallels and synergies between the processes and structural injustices that seek to marginalise and exclude in terms of gender, race and/or other dimensions of difference. Our work together enabled us, individually and collectively, to reclaim spaces of representation and represent our worldviews in ways that resist dominant narratives. It also reminded us of the importance of understanding women’s lives not just as refugees and migrants but also as mothers and wives ‘at the borders of humanity’ (O’Neill *et al.*, 2019).

Ultimately, the project has shown us that we do not need to be constrained by the particular boxes and categories within which we find ourselves – and are put in by others. Our resilience and refusal to be limited by these categories was a strong theme emerging through our prose. And so too was our determination to resist the ways in which our lives and identities as women were positioned and represented by others. For us, and we hope for others, these kinds of artistic collaborations can provide a catalyst for transformation, offering new ways of self-expression and, in turn, new ways of understandings of the experiences of those who move.

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