

# BREAKING THE CODE

SUMMARY REPORT, SIMON FELLOWSHIP 2023 – 2024

Stella Barnes



## Acknowledgements

In working on this project and in composing this report, I recognise and express gratitude to those who have yet been and are currently part of similar struggles; in particular the Black arts movement in the second half of 20th century and the more recent the Black Lives Matter uprising which, among other things, *woke-up* the arts sector from a deep sleep, exposing the systems and structures that exclude Global Majority<sup>1</sup> artists.

I also recognise the intersectional nature of this work. Any changes in the sector that benefits people who have lived experience of forced migration will, I hope, benefit other minoritised groups and visa-versa, and the Breaking the Code project stands in solidarity with all groups who experience exclusion and oppression.

My deep gratitude goes to members of the Artist Focus Group

Emmanuel Yogolelo

Parisa Pirzadeh

SA.M.M. Noor-Us-Saiyem Khan

Masresha Wondmu

Fariba Taghy poor

Oleksandra Derevianko

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<sup>1</sup> A collective term that speaks to and encourages non-white persons as belonging to the majority in the globe, referring to people who are racialised as Black, African, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the Global South and/or racialised as 'ethnic minorities'. These groups currently represent approximately 80% of the world's population. <https://ilpa.org.uk/people-of-the-global-majority/>

Tahmineh Khorami

Abas Eljanabi

Jamal Jameel

Ashleigh Beatie

Yousef Sadat

Haleh Jalali

Fereshteh Day

Sahar Alsabbagh

Ambrose Musiyiwa (also PhD candidate and advisor to the project)

These individuals gave generously of their time; sharing their experiences of settling in the UK and of navigating the arts and cultural sector. They recounted painful memories and challenging experiences, as well as helping to construct positive solutions, and they trusted me with this material. I hope that, through this project, I have done justice to their contributions.

I would also like to thank the following people who have supported me with this project

Dr Alison Jeffers (University of Manchester Research Supervisor)

Professor John McAuliffe (University of Manchester/Creative Manchester)

Anne-Marie Nugnes (University of Manchester/Creative Manchester)

Katherine Rogers (Community Arts North West).

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# Executive Summary

## Background

In 2023 I was awarded the Simon Industrial Fellowship, run by the University of Manchester. This fund was set up by the University in 1990 to provide opportunities for people employed in industry, the public sector and third sector to undertake a fixed-term placement within the University.

Receiving this award has enabled me to undergo research in collaboration with a Focus Group of artists with lived experience of forced migration. My fellowship was supported by the Department of Drama and Film in the School of Arts Languages and Cultures and was a partnership between the University of Manchester, Community Arts North West and Creative Manchester.

In the original submission, my research supervisor, Dr Alison Jeffers and I described the intention of the research as follows:

Refugee artists have potential to be catalysts for innovation in arts and culture in Britain and contribute to future policy and strategy. Research findings suggest that the arts/cultural sector has poor inclusion of refugee artists and that structures and systems continue to stereotype, compartmentalise and exclude refugees, resulting in their cultural production existing at the margins.

*Through this Fellowship we intend to create opportunities for positive dialogue between academics, policy makers, artists and arts institutions; thereby encouraging systems change in the arts and culture sector that leads to better inclusion of refugee artists.*

In this report I reference the wider political and cultural landscape that are relevant to and have informed the research period 2023 to 2024, including:

- The asylum system, anti-immigration policies, such as Stop the Boats and the Rwanda Plan, negative attitudes to migration and the impact on people with experience of forced migration.
- The Black Lives Matter Movement, institutional racism and how these elements intersect with the arts and cultural sector and decolonisation; in particular, the impact of the killing of George Floyd in the USA in 2020 and the subsequent response of Black artists.
- The 2023-2024 Israeli genocide in Gaza and The West Bank, colonialism, the student protests and the revelation of Israeli linked funding of arts, culture and Universities.

## Research Collaborators

Crucial to the research process was an Artist Focus Group of sixteen artists with experience of forced migration, who were co-researchers, involved in mapping the systems that are inherent in the arts and cultural sector and composing a message to the sector, which was delivered through a zine and through an event. I also worked with a smaller group of three artists, who were a working group co-designing and curating the event. It is important to note that artists who made a larger contribution, in terms of time, such as those who co-designed the event and made artistic or research-based presentations, were paid a fee for their work.

Breaking the Code was also a partnership between The University of Manchester,

Community Arts North West and Creative Manchester. I collaborated closely with Ambrose Musiyiwa, University of Manchester PhD candidate, whose research, *Listening to the Voice of Refugee Artists*, was pertinent to the topic of my fellowship research.

## Methodology and Approach

I drew on Participatory Action Research and System Change Methodology to guide my research process. I had previously been part of projects and initiatives that used these methods and approaches and I believe they were the most appropriate, due to the democratic and inclusive elements in both methods.

## Mapping the System

The first task of the Artist Focus Group was to map the systems in the arts and cultural sector that they considered most relevant to artists with lived experience of forced migration. The Focus Group reflected on their experiences of the systems and the impact the systems had made on their creative and personal lives. Discussions focused on five themes:

### Language

Delays in becoming fluent in English, often due to the lack of affordable English language courses, was perceived as a significant barrier for artists, which resulted in a lot of time lost before they felt confident to engage with the arts and cultural sector. Jargon used by the cultural sector also created barriers for artists. Many artists experienced negative perceptions from the arts and cultural sector, because they spoke English with an accent. This was particularly significant for actors who were often turned down for roles because of their accents. There was sometimes a negative response to artists proposing to make work that was presented in community languages and a lack of understanding of the significance and value of this.

### Resources and Access

All artists experienced challenges due to lack of resources and access to opportunities in the arts and cultural sector. This was exacerbated by their lack of resources to make art. The balancing act between making art and making a living was described as extremely difficult by many artists. This sometimes resulted in artists

giving up making art permanently or for many years.

### Racism and Colonialism

Most artists described experiencing racism in the arts and cultural sector and this had often resulted in a negative impact on their well-being. Artists described experiencing anti-refugee sentiment and being pigeonholed into certain kinds of work, because they were refugees. Artists described the arts and cultural sector as having deep roots in colonialism, which resulted in a mind-set that saw them as less sophisticated than white artists.

### Health

Health was a big issue for artists, with the asylum system and continued exclusions having a negative impact on their physical and mental health. The stress caused by the systems in the arts and cultural sector added to their stress. Poor mental and physical health sometimes made it difficult for artists to continue their creative practice.

### Change

The artists discuss the possibilities for change within the arts and cultural sector, what might be catalysts for change and what might be barriers. The artists worried that the arts and cultural sector was not willing to change.

## Constructing a Message for the Arts and Cultural Sector

Once the Artist Focus Group had interrogated the systems in the arts and cultural sector, they set about devising a message for the arts and cultural sector. The message was constructed into parts: the need for the sector to apply **Conscious Inclusion** and the need for the sector to stand in **Solidarity** with artists.

Each of the two sections was divided into a series of appeals, as follows:

### Conscious Inclusion

1. *Invite us: We would like you to invite us to your events, such as press nights,*

- networking, conferences, debates and please introduce us to people.
2. *Promote us: We would like you to raise our profile, through your social media and websites.*
  3. *Support us: We would like you to broker relationships between us and other artists, producers, agents, programmers, networks and your staff teams. We would like you to find ways to establish free or affordable studio space, recording facilities and rehearsal space.*
  4. *Profile us: We would like you to recognise and celebrate diverse aesthetics, and art making processes that might be unfamiliar to you. We want to be free to make the work that has integrity for us and we would like people to respect, support and celebrate this.*
  5. *Invest in us: We need more people in leadership positions who represent the Global Majority. We would like you to invest in the support needed to make this happen. We'd also like to see paid opportunities that go beyond early career or emerging artists' opportunities and investment in well-resourced platforms for our work.*

### **Solidarity**

1. *Value lived experience. We'd like the sector to value lived experience and work experience gained abroad, equally with UK work experience. This would include always having people with lived experience designing and leading projects related to them.*
2. *Let us advise you. We'd like the sector to invite us onto your Boards, your advisory groups, interview panels and programming groups.*
3. *Challenge racism. We would like the sector to acknowledge and address white privilege and racist bias in organisations. Acknowledge there is a hierarchy of aesthetics and cultural forms and act to challenge this.*

4. *Reject stereotypes. We would like the sector to challenge the locked mind-set that sees refugees as outsiders, victims and unprofessional and recognise us as essential to culture in the UK.*
5. *Stand up. Be explicit that you stand in solidarity with refugees. Show your solidarity in actions. Support campaigns like Lift the Ban, challenge the hostile environment, The Rwanda Policy and support safe routes to the UK.*

This appeal to the arts and cultural sector was presented at an event at Contact Theatre in February 2024 and in the Breaking the Code Zine, which also captured the Artist Focus Group's experiences of the arts and cultural sector through a series of illustrations (see Appendix 2).

### **Response to the Event and Zine**

Evaluative responses from the event and the Zine were extremely positive. Artists who attended described an experience of being heard and represented in a way that they hadn't experienced in the past.

*I heard others like me talk and agree on what they need to make their artistic lives better now and irrefutably in the future.*

Feedback from industry professionals who attended indicated that they were hearing things in a new and refreshing way and that the Breaking the Code presentation opened their eyes to the experiences and potential of artists with experience of forced migration.

*How important art can be in changing narratives and making impact, imagining what we could see if artists were represented and celebrated.*

People were disappointed that there were not more senior leaders from the arts and cultural

sector in attendance. Some attendees suggested that events like this should be compulsory for senior management teams in arts and cultural organisations.

The evaluation invited attendees to make a pledge to do something straight away.

Examples included:

*Create awareness, talk more about refugee artists, take the opportunity to make a difference.*

*Invite the Breaking the Code research team to our organisation.*

*Continue to advocate for access to arts and funding for Global Majority.*

*We are reviewing our recruitment and policies on diversity and inclusion, that's my thinking.*

Most significantly, there was a great deal of energy and enthusiasm for Breaking the Code to continue in some way. Many of the attendees expressed interest in continuing the conversation and to do some planning and actions together that would impact on the arts and cultural sector.

*More conversations. More focus groups. Make something together. Another meeting (once we have reflected) with eight actionable steps and people or organisations who will implement them.*

### The Future of Breaking the Code

Following the Breaking the Code event, a group of representatives from the Artist Focus Group met to discuss the future of the initiative.

Discussions included:

- The original Artist Focus Group is a group of highly skilled, capable and committed people.
- Artists from the Focus Group are keen for Breaking the Code to continue and are particularly interested in

disseminating the work to different city regions.

- There is an idea for original Breaking the Code artists to become ambassadors for the project.
- Performances by artists were considered to be an important part of Breaking the Code events.
- Breaking the Code could be seen as an artist led think-tank for arts and migration, with a home in sympathetic organisation.
- Breaking the Code would require a strong partnership framework and significant investment to ensure that everyone who contributes is properly paid for their time.

## Background

The *Breaking the Code* research project looked at structural inequity in the arts and cultural sector, through the eyes and experiences of artists with lived experience of forced migration, who live and work in Greater Manchester. The project aimed to create platforms for positive dialogue between artists, arts and cultural leaders, academics and policymakers. As people with very specific lived experience, the artists are disproportionately impacted by current social and political events and trends, both nationally and internationally.

There is an inescapable political backdrop to this work. My research project began in October 2023, in the week that Israel began bombing Gaza and during a period when the British government was attempting to significantly change immigration policy. I wrote this report in the spring and summer of 2024, as the bombing of Gaza continued and around the time of the British general election.

## Asylum Policy and Practice

In recent years, the British Conservative government has defined the majority of asylum seekers as illegal, due to them arriving in the UK through informal routes, or by the 'back door'. **Stop the Boats** became a slogan for the Conservative party who were determined to stop asylum seekers arriving in small boats, across the channel from mainland Europe. This is significant because in 2024, there were virtually no formal routes, no 'front door' for people to arrive and claim asylum in Britain.

Many asylum seekers live in extreme poverty, with a constant fear of deportation. From 2010 the Conservative Government systematically removed the human rights of undocumented people, – meaning people who couldn't prove they have a right to live in the UK – through a set of policies known as the Hostile Environment, which seeks to:

*'make life in the UK as unbearable as possible for undocumented migrants so that they leave – and others think twice about coming – by blocking access to public services and pushing them into extreme poverty. Under the hostile environment, employers, landlords, NHS staff and other public servants have to check your immigration status before offering you a job, housing, healthcare or other support.'*<sup>2</sup>

In April 2022 the UK and Rwanda signed an agreement for the UK to deport people seeking asylum in Britain to Rwanda, known as the 'Migration and Economic Partnership', or 'Rwanda Plan'<sup>3</sup>. The UK government stated that

<sup>2</sup>

<https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/fundamental/hostile-environment/>

<sup>3</sup> The Rwanda Plan was paused after the announcement of a general election on 4th July 2024. In June 2024 around 200 people were still held in detention as part of the plan. Two days after taking office, the Labour Prime Minister, Sir Keir

any asylum seeker entering the UK 'illegally' or by informal routes, after 1st January 2022, from a safe country such as France, could be sent to Rwanda. Implementation of the Conservative Party's **Illegal Migration Bill** was delayed by several challenges on its way through Parliament; however, the bill finally received Royal Assent on 20 July 2023 and in April 2024 the Home Office, began raiding the homes of people the government had identified for deportation to Rwanda.

## Black Lives Matter

In 2020, (during the Covid 19 Pandemic), the murder of George Floyd, by a police officer in Minneapolis, USA, gave rise to the huge global uprising of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Part of this was a reckoning between the BLM movement and British systems and institutions, such as the police, universities, schools and, most relevant to this research, between Black artists and the British arts and cultural sector. Artists called for the sector to address its deep, historic, colonial legacies, and racist systems by committing to:

*challenge structural and institutional racism, demanding ethical, accountability beyond performativity*<sup>4</sup>

Jade Montserrat, Cecilia Wee, Michelle Williams Gamaker, Arts Professional 2020

This project intersects closely with the agenda of the BLM movement in terms of the intention to have a positive impact on systemic racism in the arts and cultural sector.

<sup>4</sup> Starmer announced that no asylum seekers would be sent to Rwanda.

<sup>4</sup> [www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/we-need-collectivity-against-structural-and-institutional-racism-cultural-sector](http://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/we-need-collectivity-against-structural-and-institutional-racism-cultural-sector)

## Arts Funding, Palestine and Colonialism

Between October 2023 and June 2024 pro-Palestine demonstrations at University of Manchester provided a backing track to this project. I would walk to meetings passing pro-Palestine student demonstrations and once inside the University building I would hear students chanting in support of Palestine and against Israel's bombing of Gaza. On one occasion, we overheard student protesters gate-crash a University Senate meeting protesting against the university's ties with arms companies and Israel, chanting "your profits are covered in Palestinian blood".

Action in solidarity with Palestine, and opposing Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian land and the genocide<sup>5</sup> on Palestinians in Gaza and The West Bank, in particular the student occupations, exposed a funding system and partnership framework in universities and in arts and cultural organisations with direct links to arms manufacture and sales and to the Israeli government and to key Israeli institutions. From October 2023 onwards several arts institutions cancelled Palestine themed events, and a growing movement of artists, standing in solidarity with Palestine, highlighted the funding of high-profile arts

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<sup>5</sup> it is widely recognised that Israel's action against Gaza meets the threshold for genocide and the International Court of Justice has ruled that the occupation is illegal.

<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-prosecutor-karim-aa-khan-kc-applications-arrest-warrants-situation-state>  
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/israel-opt-icc-applications-for-arrest-warrants-for-netanyahu-sinwar-and-other-senior-israeli-and-hamas-officials-crucial-step-towards-justice/>  
[https://www.democracynow.org/2024/7/22/diana-buttu\\_icj\\_israeli\\_occupation\\_palestine](https://www.democracynow.org/2024/7/22/diana-buttu_icj_israeli_occupation_palestine)

[www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/3/genocide-urbicide-domicide-how-to-talk-about-israels-war-on-gaza](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/3/genocide-urbicide-domicide-how-to-talk-about-israels-war-on-gaza)

organisations by pro-Israel or Zionist institutions.

Palestine and Israel are relevant to this project for many reasons. *Breaking the Code* is part of a growing movement lobbying the arts and cultural sector to address its colonial legacy and the colonial systems and structures that continue to exist. Palestinian refugees are one of the largest groups of displaced people in the world. Palestinians eligible for support from UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East) number approximately 5.9 million<sup>6</sup> and there are many Palestinian refugee artists living and working in Britain.

The occupation of Palestine by Israel includes countless examples of persecution and human rights abuses over several decades, for example the historic expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians during the Nakba in 1948 and the recent killing of tens of thousands of civilians in the 2023-24 Israeli bombings and Israeli Defence Force ground offensives in Gaza. Experiences of Palestinians both historically and currently are powerfully resonant for many people who have experienced forced migration, due to similar oppression.

If we accept that Israel/Zionism is a colonial project, the close connections between arts, culture, higher education and Israel/Zionism, conflicts with any stated commitment institutions may have expressed to decolonise.

## My Connection with Arts and Migration

I am a theatre maker, creative facilitator and arts manager with almost 4 decades' experience of working in community and

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>

participatory arts in London, West Yorkshire and Manchester.

I began working in the area of arts and migration at around the turn-of-the-century, which means that as I write this report, I have been working in the field for almost 25 years.

My quarter-of-a-century journey in this work has been both a privilege and an extraordinary learning experience; bringing me into close collaboration with communities and artists from all over the world. This work, by its nature, has presented me with many challenges, in particular ethical and political challenges and it is through responding directly to these challenges and especially through reflecting with collaborators, that I have deepened my learning and continue to develop my practice.

I see the six-months of the Simon Fellowship, as part of an ongoing research journey, which has spanned at least the last 25 years and maybe longer; if I consider my family's experience of forced migration and the profound impact that has had on my life and choices. I also consider this research to be a collaboration, which has involved many people I've been fortunate to meet and connect with over the years, whose wisdom and insight have shaped my work and continue to do so. I have named a few people who have contributed to my development in *Appendix 1: Biography of Arts and Migration*, however there are many more, including hundreds of young people, artists and creatives with experience of forced migration, who have chosen to work with me.

Working in the field of arts and migration has provoked many questions for me about my practice and the ways in which I, as someone who has benefited from white privilege, work in partnership with artists who have experienced forced migration. Since the early 1980s I have been in several positions where I

have been able to observe the workings of the arts and cultural sector from the inside and, through close collaboration with others, have built knowledge and awareness of how the systems of the arts and cultural sector exclude and marginalise artists, especially those from global majority background.

Through participating in training between 2020 and 2022 with **The Racial Justice Network**<sup>7</sup>, an organisation in West Yorkshire that proactively promotes racial justice, I came to recognise the arts and cultural sector as having a white supremacy culture, resulting from the sector having significant historical ties to colonialism.

In 2001 Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun from ChangeWork, authors of *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*<sup>8</sup>, outline a number of characteristics of white supremacy culture including:

*'the belief there is one right way to do things and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it; when they do not adapt or change, then something is wrong with them (the other, those not changing), not with us (those who know the right way).*

**Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun 2001<sup>9</sup>**

I became particularly conscious of how the art-making practice and aesthetic of Global Majority artists I was working with, who had also experienced forced migration, was often viewed as less sophisticated than the work of white British or European artists and therefore less desirable to arts and cultural organisations. I also witnessed many

<sup>7</sup> <https://racialjusticenetwork.co.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://sacred.omeka.net/items/show/221>

<sup>9</sup>

[https://www.thc.texas.gov/public/upload/preserve/museums/files/White\\_Supremacy\\_Culture.pdf](https://www.thc.texas.gov/public/upload/preserve/museums/files/White_Supremacy_Culture.pdf)

instances where the professionalism and wisdom of Global Majority artists was questioned. I saw that encountering these attitudes, amongst other barriers, made it incredibly difficult for artists to access opportunities and gain any recognition for their work. I have also witnessed the harm that these rejections have had on artists' well-being.

I saw this research as an opportunity to interrogate this further, in collaboration with artists, creating a process by which we would jointly articulate our perceptions and experiences.



Participants in Breaking the Code Event

## Research Collaborators

Collaboration has been at the heart of my Simon Fellowship and I consider the research to be collectively owned between me and a range of collaborators.

**The Artist Focus Group** was essential to the development of the project. The group was mainly made up of artists who had experienced forced migration. There were 16 artists from 9 countries of origin. Artists had been living in the UK for between 1 and 25 years and their practice included: music, theatre, visual arts, photography, creative writing, arts

management/producing, publishing, participation and academia.

The focus group members became involved in the project by responding to a call-out from Community Arts West. I knew, and had previously collaborated with eight members of the focus group, on various projects, between 2019 and 2024, while I was Creative Director of Community Arts North West.

We met together on several occasions between November 2023 and January 2024, creating an environment where artists could explore and share their experiences of the cultural sector and contribute their wisdom and insights. Together, we developed a range of materials, which were later shared with a wider group of interested people at the **Breaking the Code** event. The Artist Focus Group, including the following:

Emmanuel Yogolelo: singer-songwriter, performer, workshop facilitator, speaker and cultural leader.

Parisa Pirzadeh: classical violin, viola and ancient string instrument ghaychak player.

SA.M.M. Noor-Us-Saiyem Khan: theatre maker and PhD candidate at University of Warwick.

Masresha Wondmu: dance and circus performer, workshop leader and creative producer.

Fariba Taghypoor: classical Persian musician, music workshop and choir leader.

Oleksandra Derevianko - theatre maker, writer and arts training manager.

Tahmineh Khorami - visual artist and singer-songwriter.

Abas Eljanabi: storyteller, actor, writer and designer.

Jamal Jameel: photographer.

Yousef Sadat, Haleh Jalali, Fereshteh Day and Sahar Alsabbagh from Hamsaz Ensemble.

Ashleigh Beatie: visual artist and sculptor.

Ambrose Musiyiwa: writer, editor, publisher and researcher.

Katherine Rogers: Creative Producer with a specialism in arts migration.

**Ambrose Musiyiwa** His PhD research project at University of Manchester, *Listening to the Voice of Refugee Artists, examines the challenges and opportunities that refugee artists experience in their performing arts practice in England* and how the artists navigate these. Through conversations with Ambrose, the Focus Group and I were able to compare research findings, drawn from his interviews with artists, with the experiences and perceptions of artists in the Focus Group.

**The Working Group** was a small group drawn from the wider Focus Group, who were offered paid roles to co-design and deliver the Breaking the Code event at Contact Theatre. Emmanuel Yogolelo and Parisa Pirzadeh worked with me to develop a presentation that represented the contributions of artists from the wider Artist Focus Group. They acted as hosts at the Breaking the Code event. Tahmineh Khorami, a visual artist, contributed to the working group by creating illustrations, using the visual metaphors developed by the Focus Group, which were included in the Breaking the Code Zine, which was given out to attendees at the Breaking the Code event.

Three other artists were paid to contribute to the event: Masresha Wondmu, dancer and Fariba Taghypoor, musician, performed at the beginning of the event and Jamal Jameel was the event photographer.

**Dr Alison Jeffers, University of Manchester Drama Department** supported the fellowship application and supervised my research.

**Marie Nugnes, Creative Manchester** offered significant in-kind support, particularly around

the logistics, practicalities and, through Creative Manchester, covered the costs of staging the event at Contact Theatre.

**Katherine Rogers, Creative Producer, Community Arts North West** was closely involved in organising the series of Focus Group meetings.



Masresha Wondmu performance at Breaking the Code Event

## Methodology and Approach

I believed that it was essential for the research process for Breaking the Code to be a collaboration with lived-experience<sup>10</sup> artists, specifically artists who have gained knowledge and understanding through personal experience of forced migration and of engaging with the arts and culture sector.

I'm was, and am, conscious that, as a white British person, who has benefited from white privilege<sup>11</sup>; has not experienced forced

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<sup>10</sup> The idea of 'lived experience' has been used in social research for some time. The aim is to foreground the direct experiences, perspectives and knowledge of research subjects that have been acquired through their life experiences, rather than focussing on the perspectives and, potentially, the assumptions of research scholars.

<sup>11</sup> I define White privilege to mean and unearned advantage.

migration; has occupied a leadership position in the arts; and who has been able to access resources, such as the University research fellowship, the relationship between the focus group and me, was not a relationship of equals. Being conscious of this inequity at every step of the research process, and reflecting on it during and after each session, was something I considered to be part of my responsibility as a researcher.

I believed it was important for the research to centre around participatory methodology. I hoped that the research could be a shared endeavour and that it would not belong to me but would be collectively owned by all the participating artists. This meant I needed to find a methodology and process that supported this. I do not have lived experience of forced migration, and as such my expertise and knowledge is a few steps removed.

I have long been inspired by the book, ***We Make the Road by Walking; Conversations on Education and Social Change***<sup>12</sup>, which is a transcription of conversation between radical educationalists, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire. In the book, Horton and Freire discuss the nature of social change and empowerment, through the lens of their life's work. What is significant about both men, is their commitment and belief that liberation is achieved through popular participation.

The research process drew on Participatory Action Research and Systems Change Methodology to create a democratic and inclusive process. I chose to use these approaches to meet the aim described above and because of my deep and long-standing commitment to co-creation. I also recognised

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<https://www.dmu.ac.uk/documents/community/decolonising/understanding-white-privilege.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Horton, Myles and Freire, Paulo *We Make the Road by Walking; Conversations on Education and Social Change* ISBN 10: 0877227756 ISBN 13: 9780877227755

that I was an outsider in the process, as I have not experienced the exclusions and marginalisation that the artists in the Focus Group have and I felt it was necessary to share the leadership of the research process.

Working in this way meant the Focus Group and I needed to resist imagining how the process would end and allow things to unfold in an intentionally unexpected way. There is something beautiful and also a bit risky for me about a process that can be flexible and responsive. I imagine it as falling into the unknown, without the safety-net of fixed plans, but with a great possibility of new discovery.



Ambrose Musiyiwa presentation at Breaking The Code Event

## Systems Change

In November 2019, when I was Creative Director of Community Arts North West, we were awarded a grant from Lankelly Chase, Greater Manchester System Changers fund. At the time I had little knowledge or experience of the growing Systems Change movement, though I could recognise a strong alignment between my values and practice and the mission of Greater Manchester Systems Changers to '*support grassroots communities to resist systems of oppression and nurture alternative realities rooted in healing, justice and liberation*'<sup>13</sup>. As part of being awarded funding, we were invited to be part of a network of other grassroots organisations and

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<sup>13</sup> <https://gmsystemschargers.org.uk/>

practitioners, who were also grantees. Through attending these network meetings (mostly on Zoom, due to the Global Pandemic), I became increasingly interested in the potential for grassroots organising to influence and change the oppressive systems that have been built in almost all sectors.

I recognised from my work with artists with experience of forced migration, that they were experts in understanding the 'systems' constructed by the arts and cultural sector, which constrains and excludes them and, as experts they would be well placed to analyse and evaluate this system and identify ways through which the system could be challenged.

*There is also an ongoing need to shine a light on dysfunctional systems which fail to address social problems, or actively make them worse. Too often the social sector is not sufficiently reflective and challenging of its own role and risks complicity in these dysfunctions. This is a missed opportunity because at their best voluntary organisations are effective in challenging systems that don't work, and good at show-casing better alternatives. Systems change is not the only way of addressing social problems, but it provides us with a helpful way of understanding them and evaluating them, and sets out principles for achieving social change.<sup>14</sup>*

**Rob Abercrombie, Ellen Harries and Rachel Wharton authors of the 2015 Systems Change Handbook, published by think tank & consultancy for the social sector, New Philanthropy Capital, funded and commissioned by charitable trust, Lankelly Chase.**

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/systems-change-a-guide-to-what-it-is-and-how-to-do-it/>



Emmanuel Yogolelo and Parisa Pirzadeh presenting at Breaking the Code Event

## Participatory Action Research

I first used Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology when I was working as an External Evaluator at Graeae Theatre Company in London on their Ensemble training programme for young D/deaf and disabled artists. I was drawn to the approach because of the democratic values inherent in PAR, which recognises shared leadership, and I was also interested because PAR researchers draw on creative processes as part of research. I thought that this approach would work well with artists and was particularly relevant for the Focus Group, because of their experience of inequity in the cultural sector.

*Participatory action research (PAR) is an approach to research that prioritises the value of experiential knowledge for tackling problems caused by unequal and harmful social systems, and for envisioning and implementing alternatives. PAR involves the participation and leadership of those*

people experiencing issues, who take action to produce emancipatory social change, through conducting systematic research to generate new knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

PAR is also a very relevant approach, when addressing a problematic system, such as the Arts and Cultural Sector.

*It involves researchers and participants working together to understand a problematic situation and change it for the better. There are many definitions of the approach, which share some common elements. PAR focuses on social change that promotes democracy and challenges inequality; is context-specific, often targeted on the needs of a particular group; is an iterative cycle of research, action and reflection; and often seeks to 'liberate' participants to have a greater awareness of their situation in order to take action.<sup>16</sup>*

Using visual images and creative narratives to share perceptions and describe experiences is often part of the PAR research process, and in the Focus Group, the artists used creative methods and metaphor to map the systems (or codes) of the cultural sector.

## Research Process

### Connecting with Ambrose Musiyiwa's Research: *Listening to the Voice of Refugee Artists*

Ambrose Musiyiwa is a PhD candidate at the University of Manchester on a collaborative

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<sup>15</sup> [https://www.nature.com/articles/s43586-023-00214-1#:~:text=Participatory%20action%20research%20\(PAR\),for%20envisioning%20and%20implementing%20alternatives.](https://www.nature.com/articles/s43586-023-00214-1#:~:text=Participatory%20action%20research%20(PAR),for%20envisioning%20and%20implementing%20alternatives.)

<sup>16</sup>

<https://www.participatorymethods.org/glossary/participatory-action-research>

doctoral programme. As part of this I was engaged as a joint supervisor of his research, when I was Creative Director at Community Arts North West. When I began the research I had been supervising Ambrose for more than three years and had a good overview of his research. It was always the intention that Breaking the Code would intersect with Ambrose's research.

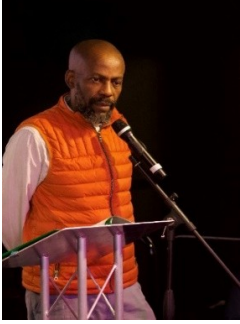
In the early stages of the project I met with Ambrose to explore how his research could inform the Breaking the Code research project. The result of this process was a very messy visual map, on several sheets of flipchart, through which we tried to represent the *Structures of Exclusion*<sup>17</sup> that exist in the arts and cultural sectors and that were described by artists in interviews conducted by Ambrose as part of his doctoral research.

Ambrose and I made several attempts to recreate this map in a form that could be

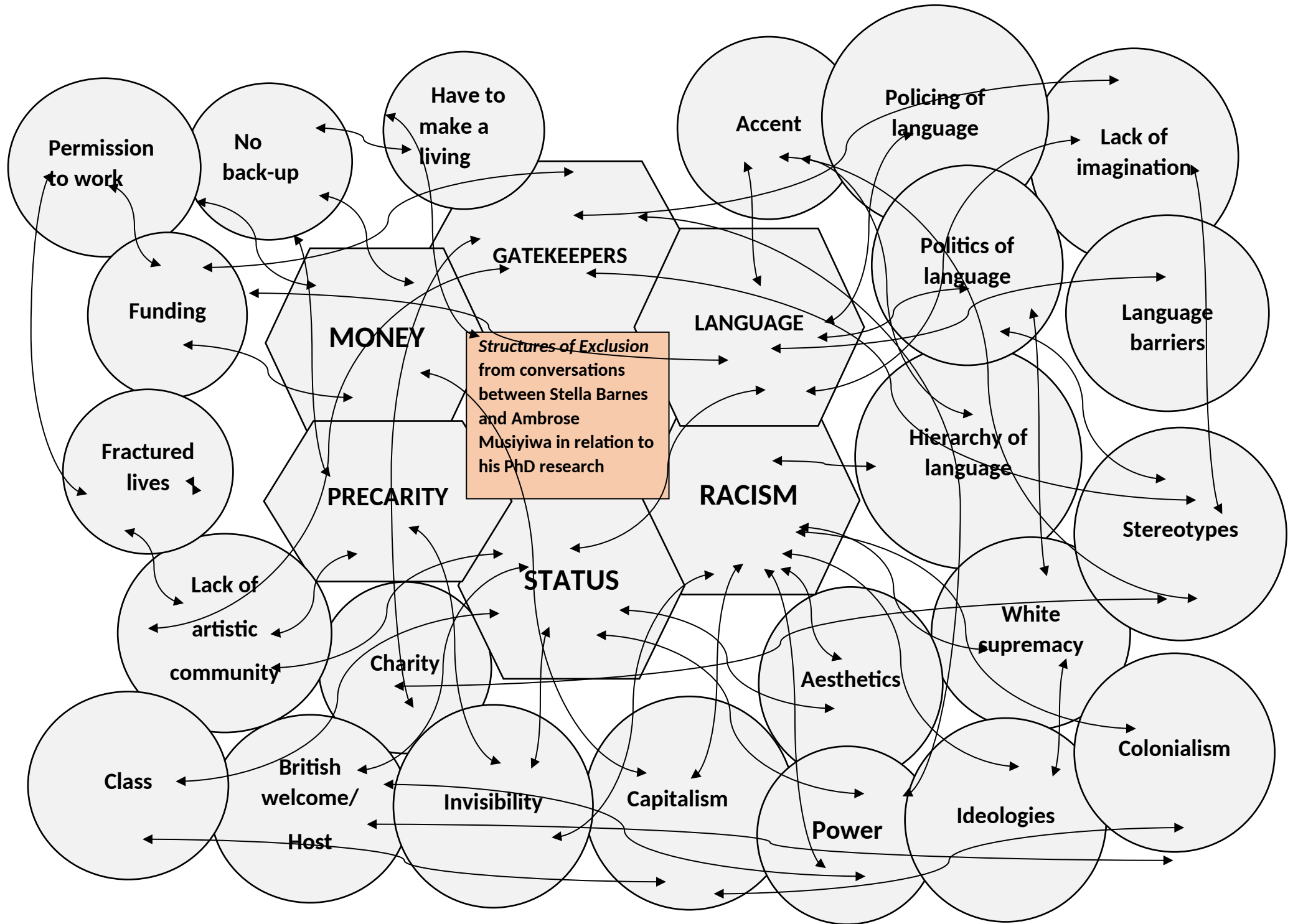
shared with the Artist Focus Group. The following diagram is the best we could get to and is a far from perfect representation. What it does demonstrate, is that the *exclusions* artists interviewed by Ambrose experience are extensive, extraordinarily complex, interconnected and have a significant historical context related to Britain's colonial relationship with the world, in particular the Global South and with several decades of migration and cultural policies.

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<sup>17</sup> Structures of Exclusion is a concept through which Ambrose Musiyiwa is describing the experiences of artists.



Ambrose Musiyiwa presenting at Breaking the Code Event



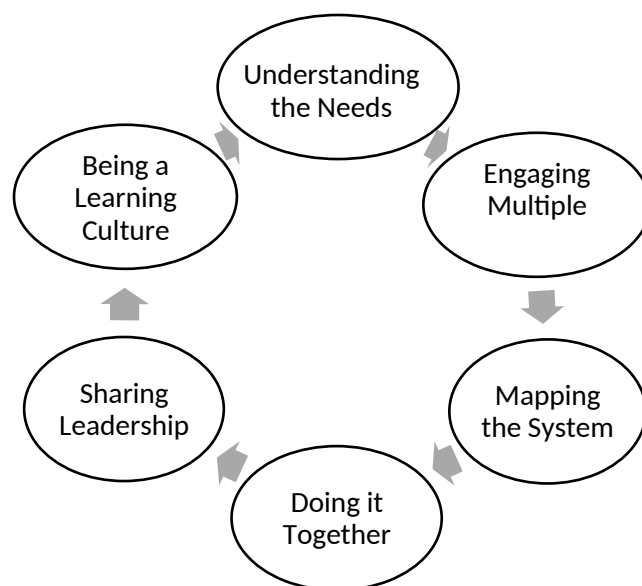
## Artist Focus Group

When we began meeting as a Focus Group, artists shared information about cultural organisations they had worked for in Greater Manchester and listed other artists who they knew, who shared the experience of forced migration. This revealed their extensive, shared knowledge of and sometimes decades-long involvement in the arts and cultural sector.

The sessions aimed to:

1. Work within the principles of Systems Change, Participatory Action Research and co-creation.
3. Support people to have a voice, be heard and be included.
4. Work towards equity in the group.
5. Work positively with difference and with difference of opinion.
6. Sit with discomfort.
7. Welcome contradictions.
8. Define what we mean by the arts and cultural sector.
9. Do some mapping of the arts and cultural sector's engagement with artists.
10. Share our perception and experience of the arts and cultural sector and co-create a picture of the sector as seen through the lens of artists.
11. Compare this with Ambrose's findings from interviews.

I introduced Systems Change Methodology and suggested we use this approach for the Artist Focus Group and for the event in February. I created this diagram, which describes the principles and processes of Systems Change, which I shared with the group.



Before beginning the process, we explored the following questions, prompted by Systems Change methodology:

1. Are we able to be ourselves and what will help us?
2. What do we each need from each other to be comfortable in the space?
3. Are there other people we think should be here that aren't?
4. Are we able to share our thoughts without fear of judgement?
5. Are we able to listen to others respectfully?
6. Are we open to new ideas?
7. What does shared leadership look like?
8. Why would we share leadership?
9. Who is learning from who?
10. How and where is learning taking place?
11. Are there any assumptions we are making?

## Mapping the System

Discussions in the Artist Focus Group around the systems that exist within the arts and cultural sector included the following: ways that artists are contracted, commissioned, paid and promoted; policies and procedures that artists and organisations are subject to or implement; organisation's history or track record of arts programming; ways that organisations and artists' work is funded and supported; systemic and institutional racism, white privilege, nepotism, favouritism and a hierarchies of aesthetics.

Mapping the system of the arts and cultural sector was a collaborative process, with the Focus Group using visual metaphors and creative descriptions to explore their perceptions of the cultural sector and the challenges and barriers within it. I asked the artists to draw rough sketches that describe the systems and structures of the sector through metaphor. When they had each drawn at least one image, we took it in turn to caption the picture out loud.

*The sector is a maze you have to navigate.*

*It's very complex to break into, to get exposure.*

*It's a winding mountain road with lots of obstacles in the way and no entry signs.*

*There is a door with an entry phone system with a sign saying GUESS THE CODE.*

*There's a big glass window and I'm on the outside looking in at the people inside and they are looking out at me. She is sitting on a whole pile of work she's made and there's still more inside. She doesn't know how to be accepted in this new ocean. Trying to find a way to go through the dark cave in front of her and show all the dreams and creativity inside.*

*Clubs! Which club do you belong to? People build bridges. The bridges can be fragile. Sometimes bridges fall down. Bilingual people help build the bridges. Sometimes there aren't enough bridges.*

*It's a house made of many different colours.*

*We are a hidden secret garden, ready to open our gates to show its beauty to everyone.*

*The garden is full of 'exotic' plants. (The reference to exotic was made as an ironic statement, referring to how the sector labels artists in this way).*

A particularly powerful metaphor came from Abas, who described the arts and cultural sector through a story of the training of Arab horses.

*When the horses are tiny, just foals, they bring them onto a tray and this tray is made from metal, which they heat up with a fire underneath, then they start playing music. The foals feel the heat on their feet and they try to balance themselves on two of their feet and then change feet, to avoid the pain. The people keep playing the music, while the foals are on the hot metal tray. When the foals grow up they associate the music with the pain they used to suffer, because of the fire. That's why, even though there is no fire, when the foals are big horses, if they hear the same music they remember the pain and they begin to dance. Like these horses, we come here and we learn a new dance and sometimes we forget our old dance. Even so, we are not accepted. It hurts us to dance to this new music. Remember, we had our own dance before we came to Britain. We want to dance from joy, but often we dance from pain.*

Another powerful metaphor was the picture of an entry-phone keypad with the caption: *Guess the Code*. This led to a discussion about how challenging it is for artists to get through the 'door' of the arts and cultural sector. The Artist Focus Group members described seeing white British artists appearing to know a secret code that gave them seemingly effortless access to the sector. This contribution and discussion was the inspiration for the title ***Breaking the Code***, which we adopted for the event and the zine we produced.

After mapping the system in this way, the next phase with the Focus Group was to compare the metaphors and captions with Ambrose's research findings from interviews with artists. Ambrose and I shared the diagram (see page 13 above) and invited the Focus Group to reflect on some questions.

- Does the diagram support your experience and perceptions?
- Which challenge would you put in the middle and why? or what would you put where?
- How has Britain influenced the histories or development of different countries and how is this relevant to how the cultural sector works and how they relate to artists?
- What is the connection between the cultural sector and whiteness and how has this influenced the image of yourself as an artist?

Discussions fell into clear categories:

### Language

The most immediate and significant barrier for artists was language. This meant that, for many, there was a delay in engaging with the arts and cultural sector, while artists became more fluent in English. Even when artists were able to speak English, they experienced negative attitudes about speaking with an

accent, or not always understanding jargon or technical vocabulary. Actors, in particular, found that they were not cast in roles, unless the role required them to have an accent. One songwriter talked about how there was an expectation for her to write lyrics in a specific way, which didn't work in the language she wrote in. Some artists said they felt that having a 'foreign' accent meant people looked down on them. Artists also talked a lot about how they were described by the arts and cultural sector, and the use of labels such as Exiled Artist, Refugee Artist.

*Presenting yourself as an artist requires fluency in English.*

*Decolonising language is important. There is a potential for multilingual work, but are people interested?*

### Resources and Access

The Focus Group talked a great deal about the lack of resources and access to opportunities. Many of them had experienced significant financial barriers to making art, for instance not being able to afford materials to make work or to have an artist studio, they couldn't afford to keep up musical instrument lessons or to hire space for recording, rehearsal or research and development processes. They also talked about the struggle to navigate opportunities in the sector. They also talked about having to work in a non-creative job, in order to pay the bills. This meant, for many artists, they lost contact with their creativity or had gaps of several years, when they didn't make work.

*People need to make work, it's part of their identity.*

*Time is important. Do we have time for making work? We need to work to live.*

*Not having a website is difficult.*

*Not having enough money to focus on making art holds you back.*

*Access to the resources to make art is a big issue.*

*Classes are expensive.*

*There isn't enough information available to us. People don't know where the important places are in Manchester, like the art galleries and organisations.*

*I have never felt good enough. The sector does that to you. It's a kind of internalised racism.*

*Invisibility is a big issue. Sometimes invisibility is self-imposed as a protection.*

## Racism and Colonialism

The Focus Group talked in depth about their experiences of racism and the impact these experiences had on the opportunities that were open to them, on their ability to make art and on their well-being. They were very articulate about racism and many artists had been involved in antiracist initiatives and had read widely on the subject. They referred to ***The Psychosis of Whiteness, by Kehinde Andrews*** and to ***bell hooks, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy*** as relevant reference points for this research.

*The refugee label can have very serious consequences. People exclude you or put you in a box.*

*Racism: have you got mobile phones where you come from? Do you ride on camels?*

*Anti-refugee attitudes can be very powerful. I didn't know I had to hide my refugee identity.*

*Racism has a big impact on mental health and mental health has a big impact on the ability to make art.*

*Experience of racism can mean people withdraw into isolated spaces or the secret garden where internationally displaced artists don't engage with the sector and at best make their own work together, without access to the resources and connections of the wider sector.*

Building on the conversations about racism, the artists talked about how the arts and cultural sector has deep roots in colonialism and how this connection impacted on the relationships between artists, their work and the sector. They also referenced how colonialism has impacted on the way their art is perceived in Britain and how British art is perceived in their countries of origin.

One artist talked about the drama training they received in Iraq, which centred around the study of European writers and theatre practitioners, such as Ibsen, Brecht and Stanislavski. These were seen as the 'greats' of world theatre. Another artist talked about their experience of visiting the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, as a young person, expecting to see artworks that represented Zimbabwean culture. Instead, they found paintings that were inspired by or poor imitations of European artists such as Turner and Monet. The gallery has since become more representative of an African aesthetic.

*The relationship between your country and the UK has an impact on how you are perceived.*

*The hierarchy of art forms can come from how British art is perceived in other countries (as well as here) as more sophisticated than other art forms. This is related to colonialism and imperialism. E.g. British Council promoting British culture abroad.*

*Experience before the UK means absolutely nothing here.*

## Health

The artists talked about health and how mental and physical health impacted on their ability to make work and connect with other people. They drew a connection between the sometimes painful experiences of going through the British asylum system and the negative impact this had on their well-being. They also noted that negative experiences continued even once they have gained status in the UK. People talked a lot about how stressful their lives were. Trying to navigate the arts and cultural sector added to this stress. They talked about how dealing with health issues sometimes made it difficult to continue practising as an artist.

*Mental health can isolate people. We need to be mentally well to be able to join with other people.*

*Physical health is also an issue, refugees are more likely to have physical and mental health problems than the general population.*

*Every time people say 'foreigners out' or there's some racist issue or hate crime, we feel pain. We remember what we suffered, what we ran away from.*

The impact of racism on mental and physical health has been well documented, including by Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*.<sup>18</sup>

## Change

We talked about change and whether the artists could imagine the arts and culture sector changing for the better. We talked

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<https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/313127/black-skin-white-masks-by-fanon-frantz/9780241396667>

about what might be a catalyst for change and what might hinder it.

The artists identified that change can happen on an individual level, for an artist, meaning that they had more opportunities, however this did not necessarily translate into things becoming better for other artists. One artist's success didn't dismantle the structural barriers for others.

*There is a lack of willingness for change.*

*Some change is happening. Some artists are gaining profile.*

*Is there enough support?*

*It's a wicked problem and needs a multidimensional approach.*

*It's a collective human experience.*

*We need solidarity. Where is the solidarity?*

*Knocking on doors is so important but very frustrating*

## Constructing a Message for the Arts and Cultural Sector

Once the Focus Group had mapped the 'system', they began to consider how the arts and culture sector needed to change. The artists selected themes from their previous discussions and from the Structures of Exclusion diagram. For each of these themes they began writing a series of instructions for the sector. These then became material for the event presentation.

The initial themes that arose were: support, inclusion, resources, progression, racism and white privilege, status, stereotyping, hierarchy of aesthetics.

We realised, after much discussion, that we could divide these themes into two categories: the need for the sector to apply

**Conscious Inclusion** and to stand in **Solidarity**. We then began sharing ideas for the 'instructions' that the artist wanted to give to the arts and cultural sector. These instructions later became the main material for the presentation at the *Breaking the Code Event*.

The artists were very clear about the need to be assertive and present a strong message to the arts and cultural sector, so that no one could say they didn't know what artists required. They also talked about the need to be absolutely clear about the benefits to the sector of collaborating with artists and the huge creative potential and possibility for artistic innovation that the sector was missing.

## Designing and Hosting an Event

In January 2024, a working group of four of us (Emmanuela Yogolelo, Parisa Pirzadeh, Tahmineh Khorami and myself) began meeting to co-create the Breaking the Code event. We began by reflecting on the values of co-creation, System Change Methodology and Participatory Action Research to develop an event that was welcoming, which invited participation and provided space for collaboration.

Once we had established what the *feel* of the event would be, we began working through the contributions from the Focus Group and developing a script for the presentations. We wanted to honour the work and the words of the Focus Group artists; sharing their contributions in a verbatim form, as much as we could.

Simultaneously, we began developing a Breaking the Code Zine, which would include illustrations representing the artists' powerful metaphors used to describe the arts and cultural sector and sharing a manifesto, which we called **Instructions for Codebreakers**. This

was a structured version of the focus group's ideas for how the arts and cultural sector could change to better include artists with experience of forced migration.

The Breaking the Code event was held at Contact Theatre on February 27, 2024. There were 45 attendees including arts and cultural sector employees, funders, independent artists (including Artist Focus Group members) and academics.

The event was hosted by Emmanuel Yogolelo and Parisa Pirzadeh from the working group and opened with a performance of classical Iranian music by Tar player Fariba Taghypoor, followed by a participatory dance and circus performance by Masresha Wondmu, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. This was followed by presentations by Emmanuel Yogolelo, Parisa Pirzadeh, Ambrose Musiyiwa and me.

## Zine Making

When we began meeting as an Artist Focus Group we did not know we were going to make a Zine. The idea took shape because of the powerful visual metaphors emerging through the Focus Group discussion and as a response to an early activity where Artist Focus Group members drew and captioned images that described their perspective of the arts and cultural sector. We were fortunate to have a Focus Group member, Tahmineh Khorami who is a gifted visual artist and was keen to capture the Focus Group ideas as illustrations and the Focus Group agreed that they were willing for her to do this. Her illustrations, inspired by the Focus Group, became an important part of the Breaking the Code Zine.

Unfortunately, there was not time or resources available to develop the Zine as a collaborative piece of work, with the whole Artist Focus Group. Tahmineh used the metaphorical descriptions from the Artist

Focus Group to create the illustrations, which were then shared back with the group for comments and suggestions. The majority of the text in the Zine was captions for the illustrations contributed by members of the Focus Group and a transcript of *Instructions for Codebreakers* which was the appeal to the Arts and Cultural Sector created by Focus Group and a central part of the presentation at the **Breaking the Code** event.

The Zine was given out to attendees at the Breaking the Code event to serve as a record of the project and we hoped it would be used as a tool, when people were advocating for change in arts and culture organisations.

Breaking the Code Zine can be viewed and downloaded [here](#).

## Conversations at the Event

During the event attendees were invited to gather in small groups and explore some questions and themes. At the end of the event they were asked to fill in an evaluation questionnaire.

The conversations and evaluation revealed some critical issues and concerns, as well as a strong desire for the Breaking the Code initiative to continue in some form. The general impression was that the event had broken new ground and had been valuable in bringing people into dialogue with each other, who would not otherwise meet.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, people welcomed the opportunity and were motivated by the possibilities that might arise from the initiative. They were inspired by and heartened by the solidarity expressed; both between artists and between artists and the wider sector. People said Breaking the Code had opened up new thinking for them and

highlighting issues in a way that was tangible and concrete.

People who were already engaged with the issues had heard them expressed in a new way and directly from people with lived experience, which was unusual. People were impressed by the *Instructions for Codebreakers*, setting out a clear way forward for the arts and cultural sector, something they might find difficult to ignore.

The discussions highlighted the need for the arts and cultural sector to work harder to support artists with opportunities, guidance and networks. There was a frustration expressed at the absence of senior leaders from the cultural sector. People felt that the issues and concerns of artists were side-lined through the absence of senior decision-makers.

Immediately after the event the Breaking the Code working group were invited to present at a cultural sector network meeting and a major arts institution in Manchester began planning an initiative for artists to provide support and networking opportunities.

## Reflections

For me the Breaking the Code research has been about listening and learning from people and facilitating listening and learning between people. It has been about foregrounding the voices and experiences of artists with lived experience of forced migration, in the hope that having a platform to raise their concerns with the arts and cultural sector might be a catalyst for change.

I have given much attention to the process, prioritising dialogue and creativity and choosing collaborative, participatory research methodology. Throughout the research process I have shared leadership of the project with the artists and I have tried to act

with integrity at every stage, being accountable to the artists and other collaborators. I have remained conscious of the inequity between me and the Artist Focus Group and have acknowledged this with the artists and have kept my eyes open to how this inequity impacted on relationships and the research process.

During the research process, I have been struck by the deep knowledge, extensive experience and political awareness of the artists who joined the Artist Focus Group. They are acutely aware of how their experiences connect with Britain's historic and current relationship with the Global Majority. They understand how their relationship with the arts and cultural sector intersects with colonialism and with the UK's anti-immigration stance and policy framework. Despite their often painful experiences of exclusion and the lack of recognition shown for their work, the artists are highly motivated both to make work and to campaign for change in the sector.

I find it frustrating and also unsurprising that the exclusions described by the artists persist. The *Breaking the Code* event demonstrated that the cultural sector understands the problem, it is not new, and yet in my 40-year career, despite many cultural policy developments around diversity, I have witnessed little change in terms of power structures and systems that privilege white artists, while excluding and marginalising Global Majority artists.

There were about 16 attendees from the arts and cultural sector at the *Breaking the Code* event. This made up approximately one third of the total attendance, artists and academics making up the other two thirds. These culture sector workers were predominantly from engagement or participation teams, from small and medium -sized organisations, and included people who have worked extensively

with artists with experience of forced migration and who have made significant efforts to create pathways for these artists. It was clear from the evaluation that these delegates were interested in hearing the perspective of the artists and highly motivated to address some of the negative experiences described in the presentations.

Invitations for *Breaking the Code* were sent to almost all the senior managers of arts organisations in Greater Manchester. I chose to invite these people, because they have the most power and influence in the sector, being responsible for all the major policy and financial decisions in their organisations. I was frustrated that very these senior arts leaders were largely absent from the *Breaking the Code* event. Though the invitations were specifically sent to them, in most cases they chose to send the middle managers described above to represent them. The fact that the people who have the most power in organisations were largely missing from the event, highlights the lack of value given to the work and experiences of artists who have experienced forced migration.

Although the *representation* of Global Majority artists may have increased during my lifetime, I believe the arts and culture sector remains stubbornly elitist and rigid, tied into systems where opportunities are out of reach to many artists and communities. An example is the business model of most arts venues that requires high ticket prices in order to sustain the venues, thus perpetuating an elite culture, where newcomers struggle to be commissioned, due to not being able to sell enough tickets at a high enough price. This results in venues perpetuating a system which continues to favour familiar, often white aesthetics, which can easily attract an audience. This also results in audiences maintaining conservative tastes and being less likely to discover something new.

Hassan Mahamdallie, previously Senior Strategy Officer, Diversity, at Arts Council England, describes what he sees as the follies of an elite system, in his article about Arts Council England's Let's Create Strategy, which he authored.<sup>19</sup>

*The belief that there is only one way of defining taste, only one canon by which to judge what is great art and what is not, has increasingly been challenged over the past forty years. In many respects, old fashioned elitist notions of a universalist Western canon have been hollowed out by streams of critical thought that have succeeded, in part, in infiltrating even our biggest arts institutions.*

*However, those who have the power to define what is 'great art' still give the impression that their judgments are based on 'expertise', following universal rules traced all the way back to the Greeks and the Romans, and that only those who are trained to decipher the code can understand the true intrinsic value of the work of art, the recital or the performance.*

*Future developments in the arts have to go beyond lip-service to vague commitments to diversity. That is especially important in an era where we face severe cuts to public spending. It would be a gross error for the arts to turn inwards, to 'preserve' the status quo. In fact, we would argue that now is the time to be bold, to acknowledge that those who we think of being at the margins are in fact, in many ways, the*

*pioneers running in front of us – showing us a different, richer, more dynamic and relevant future for the arts and wider culture..<sup>20</sup>*

The sector seems to work very hard to maintain and uphold a system that stifles creativity. In their *Instructions for Codebreakers* the artists asserted their belief that the contribution of artists with experience of forced migration is beneficial for the arts and cultural sector, bringing new perspectives and aesthetics, essential to innovation and helping the sector remain relevant, in culturally diverse Britain. This is backed up by several sources. Rasheed Araeen, Karachi-born, London-based conceptual artist, sculptor, painter, writer, and curator put it to Arts Council England that:

*The presence of artists of African and Asian origin in this country, and their historical achievements, was a gift to this society's struggle to come to terms with its postcolonial realities.<sup>21</sup>*

Araeen's perspective, similar to members of the Focus Group, considers the presence of Global Majority artists in Britain as a gift. His reference to *postcolonial realities* is interesting at a time when arts organisations pay lip-service to decolonisation, while maintaining colonial legacies and links with colonial projects, such as Israel. It remains to be seen how the recent exposure of this double standard will impact future policy and practice.

The Focus Group members commented on how their perspective as outsiders, also benefits the sector. Mehrdad Seyf, Director of performance company 30 Bird Productions

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<sup>19</sup> The creative case for diversity was developed by Hassan Mahamdallie while he was senior strategy officer, diversity, at Arts Council England (ACE), the public funding body and development agency for the arts in England. It was launched at a 500 strong conference in Manchester, UK, in 2011.

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<sup>20</sup> [The Creative Case for Diversity in Britain - Third Text](#)

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

sees this position as part of the future of arts and culture.

*You are all outside of it – this outsidership is important, even mentally I think about standing outside looking in, that is the nature of the engagement. Those of us who don't really have a country are never quite 100%. A group of people who you cannot categorise but who have access to so many references. These in-betweeners are increasing. It's the way of the future.<sup>22</sup>*

The artists from the Focus Group also see themselves as part of an exciting new era in arts and cultural development in Britain. Their message is clear:

*We are excited by the divergent thinking that happens when artists with different cultural practices come together and we believe that some of the most exciting work comes when we inhabit these unpredictable spaces. We want the sector to embrace this. We are prepared to take risks, and would like you to take risks too.*

## The Future of Breaking the Code

In May 2024, at a meeting with some of the original Artist Focus Group, we reviewed the findings of Breaking the Code and considered the future of the project.

Those who attended were keen for Breaking the Code to continue. They believe the work had only just begun and they could see the potential for disseminating Breaking the Code in other regions in Britain.

They suggested that members of the Artist Focus Group could become Breaking the Code Ambassadors, sharing the work with artists, organisations and networks in other city regions in Britain. This could build a movement that would grow, making it harder for the arts and cultural sector to ignore the manifesto. Touring Breaking the Code to other cities would enable the artists to learn from each other, cross regionally and build a national network.

Artist Focus Group members envisaged events similar to the Breaking the Code event at Contact Theatre, with performances and creativity as central to the event style. They imagined visiting different cities sharing the event and returning to the Breaking the Code *home* at regular intervals to reflect, learn and regroup.

They described Breaking the Code as being like a think tank, a place where research, new thinking and innovation comes together to influence and lobby the arts and cultural sector. They were interested in further developing a methodology that centred around participation and collaboration and creating a culture of learning. They saw it as the beginning of a movement that could make a real difference for artists and the sector. They described the tools of Breaking the Code being *human powered!*

They wish to do some strategic planning, interrogating the long-term vision, aims and purpose of Breaking the Code and consider what the structure of the project could be: Is it a membership organisation, an association, a cooperative, a movement? They want to articulate what the benefits to artists are of being part of Breaking the Code and what Systems Change in the arts and cultural sector would look like.

They recognise that a project that focuses on justice and human rights needs to embody

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

this in the way it operates. They also recognise that the systems that exist in the arts and cultural sector do not embody the values of Breaking the Code and this mismatch could create tensions that make the project particularly complex.

The Focus Group certainly have commitment and are extremely skilled and capable, however their lives are complicated by the impact of the asylum system and the continued exclusions they experience. They generally lack resources and do not have the capacity to volunteer on a long-term initiative. It is clear that for Breaking the Code to continue, it would require significant financial resources to both pay artists for their time and to promote and host events.



Fariba Taghypoore performing at Breaking the Code Event

The ideas and methodology of Breaking the Code are still in development and more time and resources will be needed to work together to explore what it means to be a movement, to interrogate the structure and working relationships best suited to the project, to build capacity and to develop the relationships that will help the project to have influence and be successful in provoking change in the sector.

Beyond the Simon Fellowship, Breaking the Code does not have a home in an organisation. The Focus Group questioned whether being part of arts or cultural organisation was appropriate for this, when the project is critical of the arts and cultural sector and seeks to directly challenge it. They are interested in looking for alliances or affiliations with initiatives that have similar Systems Change objectives, such as *Greater Manchester Systems Changers*. They are also interested in connecting with other antiracist movements in arts and culture, such as Museum Detox.

In summary:

The original Focus Group is a group of highly skilled, capable and committed people.

Artists from the Focus Group are keen for Breaking the Code to continue and are particularly interested in disseminating the work to different city regions.

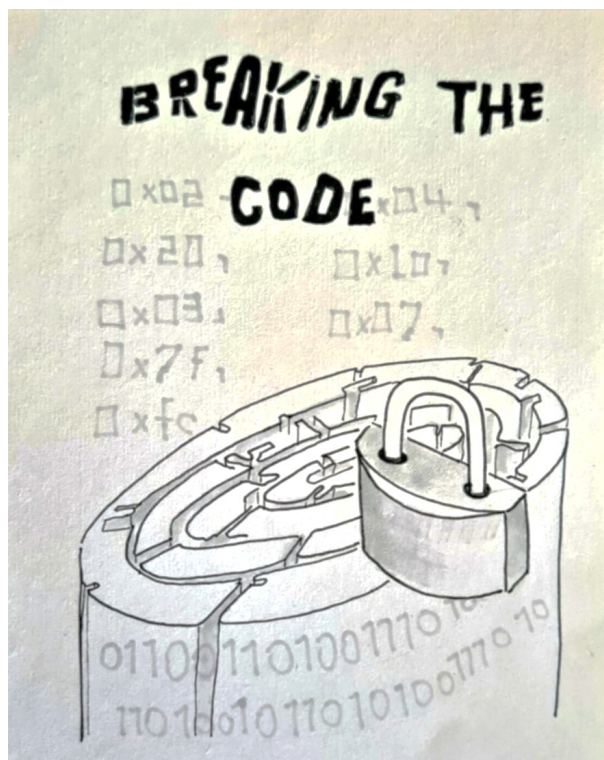
There is an idea for original Breaking the Code artists to become ambassadors for the project.

Performances by artists were considered to be an important part of Breaking the Code events.

Breaking the Code could be seen as an artist led think-tank for arts and migration, with a home in a sympathetic organisation.

Breaking the Code would require a strong partnership framework and significant investment to ensure that everyone who contributes is properly paid for their time.

## Extracts from the Breaking the Code Zine



### **A message from artists to the arts and culture sector 2024**

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Breaking the Code* is a research project looking at structural inequity in the arts and cultural sector, through the eyes of artists with lived experience of forced migration, who live and work in Greater Manchester.

The project aims to create platforms for positive dialogue between artists, arts and cultural leaders, academics and policymakers.

*Breaking the Code* was made possible by support from the Simon Industrial Fellowship run by the University of Manchester. This fund was set up by the University in 1990 to provide opportunities for people employed in industry, the public sector and third sector to undertake a fixed-term placement within the University.

In 2023 Stella Barnes was awarded the Simon Industrial Fellowship, which enabled her to undergo research with a focus group of artists with experience of forced migration.

*Breaking the Code* was supported by the Department of Drama and Film in the School of Arts Languages and Cultures and is a partnership between the University of Manchester, Community Arts North West and Creative Manchester.

## THE ARTISTS' FOCUS GROUP

An artists' focus group worked with Stella Barnes to develop *Breaking the Code*. The group is made up of 16 artists from 9 countries of origin, who have lived in the UK for between 1 and 25 years.

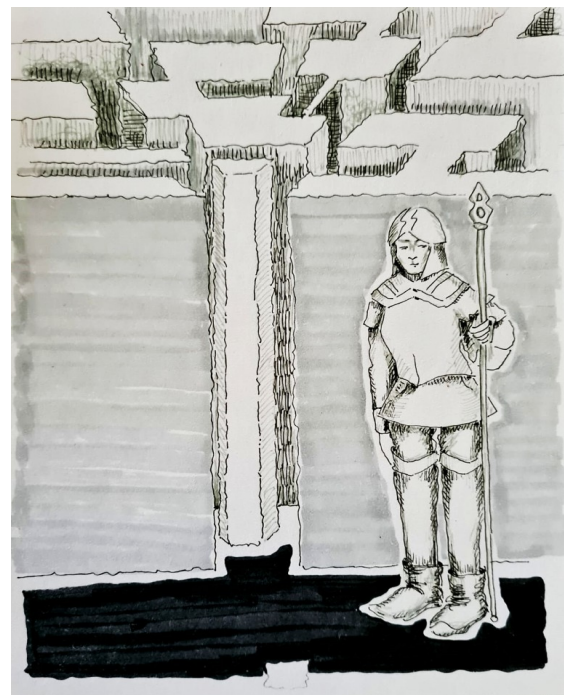
Their creative specialisms include: Theatre, Photography, Design, Creative Writing, Music, Journalism, Arts Management, Producing, Dance, Circus, Visual Arts, Publishing, Participation, Creative Facilitation and Academia.

The focus group worked together between November 2023 and February 2024, drawing on participatory action research; co-creation and systems change methodologies.

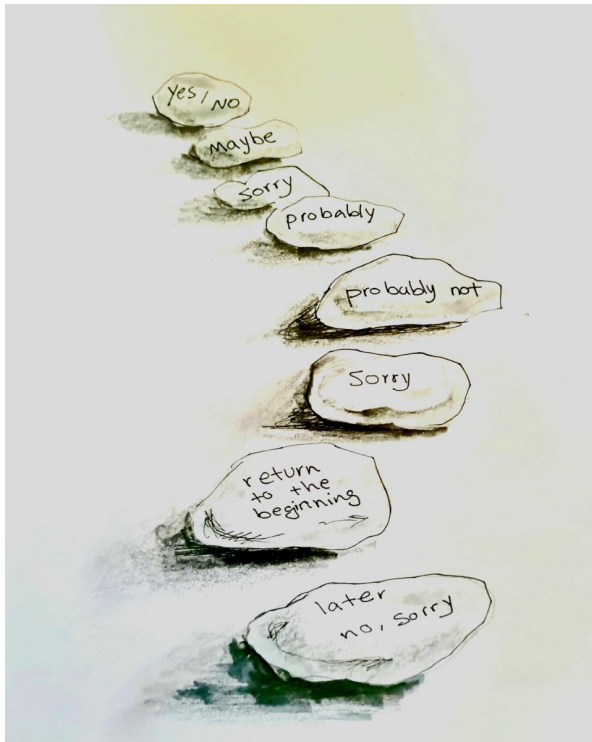
The group began by using creative methods to describe the barriers they experienced navigating the arts and cultural sector in the UK. This led to the creation of a set of illustrations, called *The Code*, created by Tahmineh Khorami, one of the focus group members.

During a second phase the focus group devised a series of requests of the arts and cultural sector, which have been given the title *Breaking the Code*.

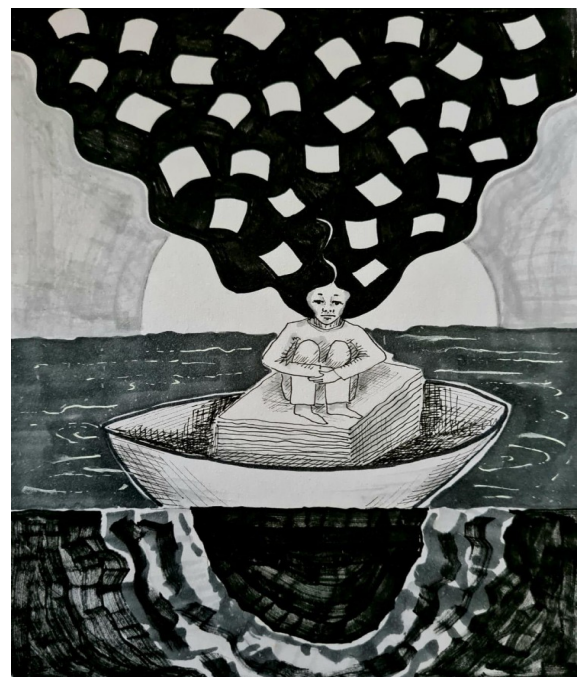
## THE CODE



How do you get past the gatekeepers?



Looking through a big glass window at you and you are all looking out at me.



The artist sits in a dark cave surrounded by all the work she has made and still she has so much more inside her. She wants to find a way out of the dark place. She wants to share all her creativity but she doesn't know where to start to be accepted in this new ocean.



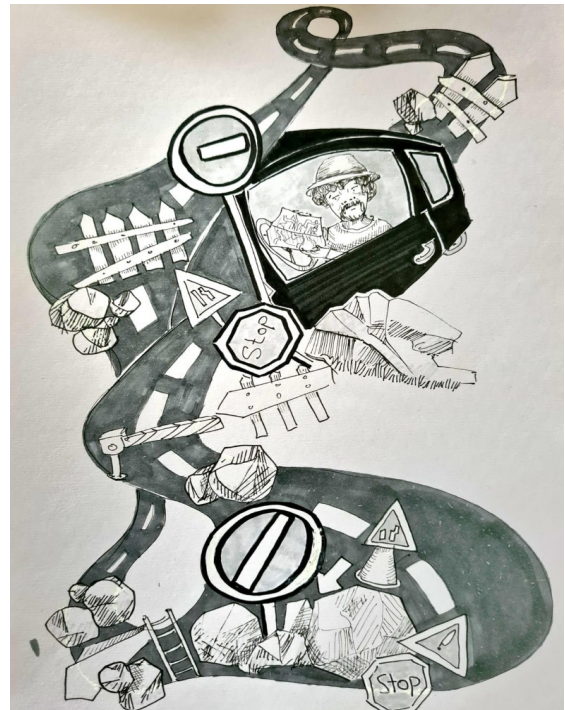
When will I receive an invitation



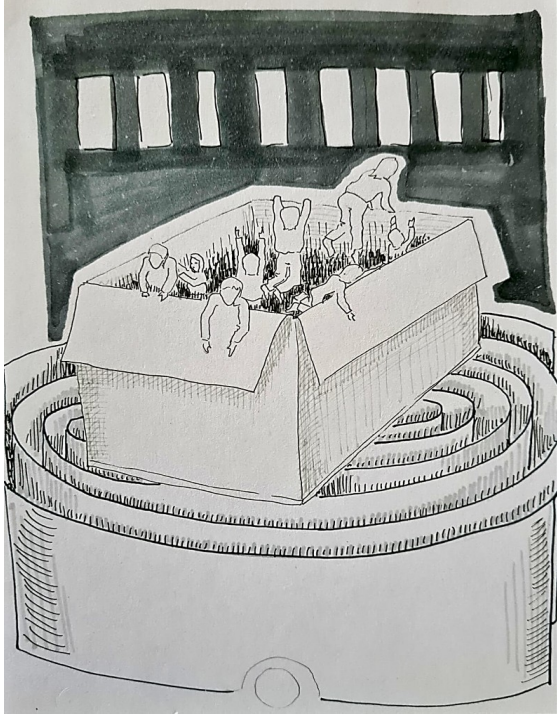
A hidden, secret garden, full of 'exotic' plants, ready to open the gates to share its beauty with everyone.

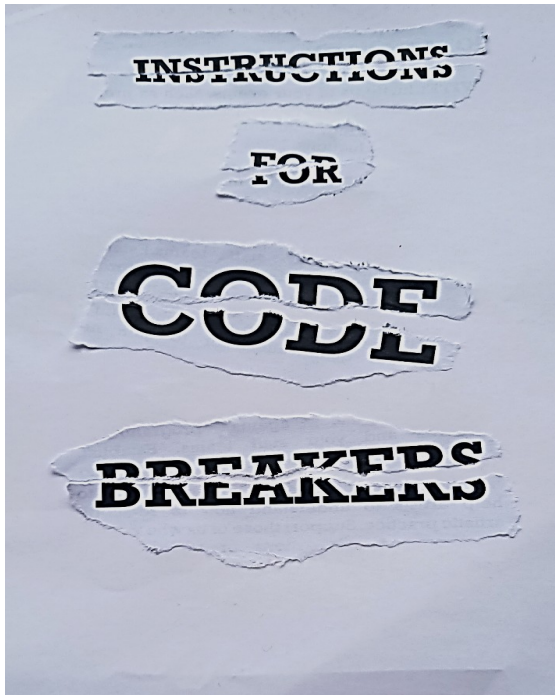


Art or money?



The narrow road to my destination, winding through the mountains, full of challenges.





## CONSCIOUS INCLUSION

### INVITE

Invite us to your events, such as press nights, networking, conferences and debates and facilitate introductions. Many of us had built successful artistic careers before we came to the UK and are experts in our field.

### PROFILE

Raise our profile through your social media and websites. Recognise and celebrate diverse aesthetics, and art-making processes that might be unfamiliar to you.

We want to be free to make the work that has integrity for us and we would like people to respect, support and celebrate this.

### SUPPORT

Broker relationships with other artists, producers, agents, programmers, networks and your staff teams and offer mentoring to help artists to re-launch their careers. Support those of us who want to convert qualifications or gain new ones. Establish free/affordable studio space, recording facilities, and

rehearsal space. Support us to access and apply for funding.

### INVEST

Invest in support that leads to senior leadership and decision-making positions. Offer paid opportunities or commissions that go beyond early career or emerging artist's opportunities. Create more well-resourced platforms for our work.

### PLATFORM

Broker relationships with other artists, producers, agents, programmers, networks and your staff teams. Establish free/affordable studio space, recording facilities and rehearsal space. Offer mentoring to help artists to re-launch their careers in the UK



## SOLIDARITY

### VALUE LIVED EXPERIENCE

Value lived experience and work experience, gained abroad, equally with UK work experience. Always have people with lived experience designing and leading projects related to them.

### LET US ADVISE YOU

Be guided by us and let us have influence on your boards, advisory groups, interview panels and in programming. We see lived-experience as a gift we can offer.

### CHALLENGE BIAS

Acknowledge and address bias, white privilege and racism in your organisation. Acknowledge that there is a hierarchy of aesthetics and cultural forms and act to challenge this. Address the lack of diversity in leadership, especially the absence of leaders from Global Majority backgrounds.

### REJECT STEREOTYPES

Challenge the locked mind-set that sees us as outsiders, victims, and unprofessional and recognise us as essential to culture in the UK. Stereotypes hurt us, they are not true and not fair. We want to be in the centre, not on the fringes.

### STAND UP

Be explicit that you stand in solidarity with refugees. Show your solidarity in actions. Support Lift the Ban. Challenge the Hostile Environment and the Rwanda Policy and support safe routes to the UK.

Artists and arts organisations have a history and tradition of being independent voices that challenge the status quo.



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creativemcr

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