INTRODUCTION

This article draws upon materials created as part of an artistic 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. 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.

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
Crawley and Nyahuye / Boxed: Exploring Containment and Resilience in Times of Crisis

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 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 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, Cracked and Resilience, 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 Magunibo – 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 held at Coventry Cathedral in November 2019. Laura was attending the event as

---

1 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.
2 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.
3 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/
4 https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/boxed/
5 https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/cracked/
6 https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/resilience/
7 See https://www.risingforum.org
a speaker and exhibitor with her beautiful collection of body adornments. Heaven was attending to speak about her work as Director of the MIDEQ Hub, 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. 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 thought-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, 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, 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. 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.

**8 Our project website contains a large number of artistic outputs and reflections not included in this article. More at [https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/](https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/)**

**9 More at [www.mideq.org](http://www.mideq.org)**

**10 [https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/03/stop/](https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/03/stop/)**

**11 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](https://coventrycreates.co.uk)**

**12 [https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/20/letter-to-heaven/](https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/20/letter-to-heaven/)**

**13 [https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/16/weaving-words/](https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/16/weaving-words/)**
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*\(^\text{14}\) 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\(^\text{15}\)

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

\(^{14}\) [https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/17/coming-together/](https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/17/coming-together/)

\(^{15}\) [https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/20/boxed-in/](https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/20/boxed-in/)
Blackness by Laura Nyahuye

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

16 https://theartistandtheprofart.blog/2020/07/16/blackness/
Whiteness by Heaven Crawley

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

17 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

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)

https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/18/shoes/
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

---

19 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 me that 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
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

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

20 https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/09/27/cracked/
21 https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/15/cracked-but-not-broken/
Sometimes the crack goes deep
Sears
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

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

No! I will not apologise
Does it offend you?

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

22 https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/16/crushed-but-not-defeated/
23 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. Urikuenedepti? 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

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
Splitter
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

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

24 https://theartistandtheprof.art.blog/2020/07/16/bend-like-the-trees/
25 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)
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.

REFERENCES


Copyright © 2022 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.