

# civis

Europe's Civic University Alliance

## CIVIS Open Labs

### Migrant Storytelling about Home and Belonging as a Transformative Tool

*Version 2025-11-05*

## 1. Context & Short Description

This project responds to rising global displacement and to the dehumanizing narratives that dominate media portrayals of refugees. It emphasizes the importance of first-person testimony and participatory arts as tools to humanize migration and challenge stereotypes. The project seeks to amplify migrants' voices while connecting communities across Spain, South Africa, and the UK.

Between May and August 2025, creative workshops in Madrid, Glasgow, and Johannesburg brought together forcibly displaced people who settled in these three cities, over the age of eighteen, and from a diverse range of nationalities, including Morocco, Russia, Ukraine, Hong Kong, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Sudan, or Palestine, among others. Participants used different artistic methods to reflect on "home" and "belonging" as both physical spaces and emotional experiences, expressing the trauma of displacement and the resilience of rebuilding. Activities were structured around narrative elements (character, object, plot) while allowing freedom of expression in multiple languages.

The project results in the eBook ***Home as Story, Stories of Home: Transformations of Belonging***, showcasing 60 participant-created artworks from the workshops. This artistic compilation sparks transnational dialogue, counters stereotypes, and interprets migration as a shared, deeply human experience. These artworks serve as both creative and pedagogical tools, offering insight into the resilience, creativity, and agency of displaced people

## 2. Partners

Partner Name	Type	Bio (2–3 lines)	Website/Link
<b>Marzanna Antoniak</b>	Stakeholder	Glasgow Network Coordinator in Migrant Voice	<a href="https://www.migrantvoice.org/meet-the-team">https://www.migrantvoice.org/meet-the-team</a>
<b>Francisco Fuentes Antrás</b>	Academic	Lecturer in British literature at the Autónoma University of Madrid	<a href="https://www.uam.es/fyl/facultad/departamentos/filologia-inglesa/francisco-fuentes-antras">https://www.uam.es/fyl/facultad/departamentos/filologia-inglesa/francisco-fuentes-antras</a>
<b>Elwira Grossman</b>	Academic	Senior lecturer in Polish and Comparative Literature at the University of Glasgow	<a href="https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/mlc/staff/elwiragrossman/">https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/mlc/staff/elwiragrossman/</a>
<b>Nina Ivashinenko</b>	Academic	Lecturer in Political and International Studies	<a href="https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/staff/ninaiwashinenko/">https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/staff/ninaiwashinenko/</a>
<b>Cristina Montero</b>	Stakeholder	Senior Psychologist in Inclusion. CEAR Central Services	<a href="https://www.pear.es/">https://www.pear.es/</a>
<b>Nereida Ripero Muñiz</b>	Academic	Senior lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand	<a href="https://nereidariperomuniz.com/">https://nereidariperomuniz.com/</a>
<b>María Ángeles Plaza Crespo</b>	Stakeholder	Senior Psychologist in Inclusion. CEAR Central Services	<a href="https://www.pear.es/">https://www.pear.es/</a>
<b>Kate Shand</b>	Stakeholder	Art therapist	<a href="https://kateshand.co.za/">https://kateshand.co.za/</a>
<b>Mirna Solic</b>	Academic	Senior lecturer	<a href="https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/mlc/staff/mirnasolic/">https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/mlc/staff/mirnasolic/</a>

### 3. Main Beneficiaries & Social Impact

#### A. Main Beneficiaries

Over the course of three to four workshops in Madrid, Glasgow, and Johannesburg, a total of 30 individuals from diverse nationalities contributed their voices and artworks.

In the project's outcome, the eBook *Home as Story, Stories of Home: Transformations of Belonging*, newcomers in Johannesburg, Glasgow, and Madrid reclaim their voices through artistic expression, sharing experiences of loss, resilience, and hope that are too often silenced. Each work becomes a bridge, connecting memory, identity, and belonging, while challenging the dehumanizing narratives that frequently dominate public discourse.

This eBook is designed for a wide range audience, including educators, students, researchers, journalists, civil society organizations, and policymakers at local, national, and international levels. By presenting first-hand artistic narratives by displaced people, it aims to foster understanding and empathy, challenge stereotypes, and provide nuanced insights into the realities of migration. Thus, it serves as a resource for those involved in designing policies, programs, or educational initiatives, offering evidence-based perspectives that highlight the voices and experiences of displaced communities. In this way, the eBook bridges artistic expression and social impact, making the experiences of migrants accessible and relevant to multiple stakeholders.

#### B. Social Impact

The project challenges the dehumanized and stereotypical portrayal of displaced people by amplifying their first-hand narratives. Participants reclaim their own stories, speaking in the first person and without intermediaries, becoming co-creators of knowledge in the process.

The creative workshops were designed not only as spaces for artistic expression, but also as safe environments where participants could feel comfortable sharing emotions, ideas, and reflections about their migratory experiences, as well as what "home" and belonging mean to them. These workshops fostered dialogue, trust, and mutual understanding, allowing participants to process their experiences while building supportive peer networks.

By integrating displaced people's perspectives, the project dignifies their experiences, counters marginalization, and promotes broader societal understanding of migration. Through storytelling and creative practice, it also contributes to the psychological and emotional well-being of participants.

Furthermore, the project promotes knowledge exchange between the three participating universities and non-academic partners, strengthening collaborative research and fostering civic values rooted in diversity, empathy, and inclusion. Ultimately, it demonstrates how participatory art and storytelling can empower displaced people, amplify marginalized voices, and inspire more inclusive societies.

Value of our project:

- The project seeks to deepen intersectoral networks. Our direct collaboration with non-academic entities like CEAR, Migrant Voice, and Windybrow contributes to

building bridges between the academic world and local social, political, and cultural stakeholders.

- The enhancement of narrative and transmedia platforms as strategic means of communication and conveying alternative viewpoints sets up and shares tools to tackle the societal challenge of mass displacement fostering more humane ways for governmental actors and citizens to approach it.
- Our project establishes knowledge co-creating teams involving associated academic and non-academic partners from three different countries. It will enrich beneficial interactions between communities on our respective campuses as well as societal stakeholders to encourage them to meet, exchange, collaborate and co-create. It will also help society acquire a global perspective on refugeehood and exile.
- To update the CIVIS strategy and agenda regarding the need to carry out transnational activities that address global problems, such as the forced displacement of people, as an international issue, offering a more cosmopolitan and less local vision.
- Our project also boosts civic engagement beyond national borders by connecting national associations that normally do not interact or collaborate despite having common objectives regarding the reception and care of migrants. Likewise, the project encourages the participating universities to put the scholarly knowledge generated into practice, accentuating the duty of academic institutions to abandon the purely academic field to provide help in the resolution of public issues.
- The project's main objective brings to light the importance of universities' commitment and responsibility to collaborate with non-academic organizations like Migrant Voice, Windybrow Centre, and CEAR. The proposed workshops had two major goals. First, they helped participants to become the owners of their own narratives by using storytelling as a tool for creative sharing of reflections on home and belonging. Second, we aimed to promote narratives resulting from these open labs as an impactful contribution that responds to the need of a fairer and humanized representation of displaced people in our societies.

## 4. Core Methodology

The project uses a **participatory arts-based and storytelling methodology** that places the voices and creative expressions of forcibly displaced people at the centre. The approach is **trauma-informed, collaborative, and inclusive**, involving researchers, community organizations, and art-therapy practitioners to ensure safe spaces and ethical participation. The project combines creative co-production, multilingual expression, and cross-cultural dialogue.

## 5. Events in the Project

Event Name	Date(s)	Location	Description (purpose, audience)
Workshop at "Glasgow Open Doors Festival"	19-09-2025	Glasgow Open Door Festival (Glasgow)	Share the artistic material produced in the workshops with the public.
Presentation in "Conference on Interculturality and Sex-Gender Diversity", held at Universidad Complutense	19-09-2025	Complutense University (Madrid)	Share the artistic material produced in the workshops with the public.
Presentation of eBook. Knowledge exchange event	TBA	Madrid	General public
Presentation of eBook. Knowledge exchange event.	TBA	Glasgow	General Public

## 6. Deliverables & Resources

Deliverable / Resource	Type (report, video, toolkit...)	Link / File	Caption / Description
eBook (planned for March 2026)			

## 7. Testimonials & Highlights

### C. A. Key Take-Aways / Highlights

Art is a language of the soul, and this project proves how much this is the case. The eBook ***Home as Story, Stories of Home: Transformations of Belonging*** is not just a compilation of stories about the loss and memory of home. It is also a journey through the hearts of the participants, who, in their generosity and courage, used art to open and express their feelings of deeply traumatic experiences which they overcame with a different degree of success. Each of these artistic works invites not only empathy but rational compassion, connection, and awareness of what it is like to be marginalized, ignored, misunderstood and/or misrepresented.

They remind us how harmful and distancing "othering" can be by displaying emotions which feel surprisingly close, if not intimate. These artistic works prove that there are no distant worlds, only imprisoned minds, and only by empathizing with and acknowledging the pain of others can we truly understand our own.

### D. B. Beneficiary Impressions / Quotes

Participants' impressions from the workshops collected in post-workshop questionnaires:  
**With respect to the artistic workshops:**

"I felt in a safe place where I could be myself."

"Four art sessions are too few. Please organize more sessions like this."

"The workshops make me feel good [because] I removed my stress out"

"I would like [these workshops] to be held regularly."

"I just want to thank you for offering this type of workshop. I think it's important to have spaces where we can express ourselves and feel heard."

**With respect to the project in general:**

"I'm very grateful for the space. I was able to open my heart and share something very intimate."

"It was amazing experience, sharing happiness and sadness with others."

"Everything was so great that I'd like to have lessons like this all summer!!!! Thank you very very very much!"

"I wanted to sincerely thank you for the opportunity you gave us to write a short story in this class. This exercise not only helped me to better understand my creativity but also made me look at narrative and writing from a different perspective. The supportive atmosphere of the class, the constructive feedback, and the freedom to choose the topic made it a very pleasant and inspiring experience for me."

## 8. Contact Point

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Institution / Role: Autónoma University of Madrid / Lecturer



## ILLUSTRATIONS THAT SHOWCASE OUR INITIATIVE:



