

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Essex		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 27		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Thinking Home: changing perceptions of migrant experiences through creative and educational practices		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2012 - 2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Professor Sanja Bahun	Professor	2007-date
Dr Mary Mazzilli	Senior Lecturer	2016-date
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2017- 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Migrant communities are often seen, and can experience themselves as, strangers in their new home. Bahun and Mazzilli's research and practice explores conceptualisations of home and home-making through the lived experiences of contemporary migrant communities. By engaging in cross-cultural participation, their research generates new pedagogical and creative practices. Their work enables a greater understanding of the relationships between different migrant communities, as well as between their host communities. A significant outcome has been engagement with schools in North Essex and Suffolk. This has resulted in changes to teaching practice and a strengthening of expertise in topics related to migration, home and cultural identity.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>Bahun and Mazzilli's research suggests a new vision and practice for homemaking of migrant communities premised on reconciling their sense of displacement with their attempt to create a new home and making this effort the focus of educational work for host communities. The starting point for this project is Bahun's conceptualisation of home as an affect that has the capacity to be experienced as polycentric, and therefore attached to a point of origin as well as a destination. This premise suggests that an affective relationship between the migrants' original home and their new residence can be established, and this mode of relationship can help them settle more readily into a new home and community. In turn, raising awareness of this operation of home in host communities can foster rapport between their own vision of home and that of immigrant communities.</p> <p>Sanja Bahun has researched the cultural expressions and perceptions of home in a wide range of communities, including societies in political transition [R1], prisoners, migrants, and exiles [R2], and in the context of inter-sectoral discussions and artistic representation [R3, G1]. An output of this research, Sanja Bahun and Bojana Petrić's edited collection <i>Thinking Home</i> [R2] and their introduction "Homing in on Home" have generated cross-disciplinary, multi-scale, and multi-sectoral discussions that became directly utilised in the impact activities. The key findings from these research outputs relevant to this impact case study include a) the reconceptualisation of home as an affect that can occur in individuals and groups [in R2]; b) discovery of home's capacity to be polycentric, a point of origin as well as a destination [in R1]; c) the dynamic interaction</p>		

between an individual's perception of home and community-building, especially in adverse historical and personal circumstances [in R1 and R2], and d) the human need to exteriorise and negotiate the affect of home and sense of belonging in artistic forms [G1 and R3]. These insights have also informed Mazzilli's research that advocates a perception of home-identity which is both transnational (attached to the country of origin) and attached to the local community of residence.

Mary Mazzilli's research, which entailed the writing and performance of a play entitled *Priority Seating* [R4], uses an ethnographic methodology (testimony, focus groups, workshops) and audience participation to investigate the multiple meanings of home for migrant communities in North Essex. Outputs of this research were not only the play but an education pack tailored for secondary and primary schools [R5]. Bahun's conceptualisation of home as polycentric and the connection made between home and community has informed Mazzilli's work on the Schools' toolkit [R5], which is shaped by the idea that home-identity accounts for the migrants' particular ability of being both transnational (and foreign) and attached to the local specific community of residence. Bahun's insights about the nature of home as affect and the propensity of home to be expressed in artistic forms have been used and further reinforced in the project by the capacity of theatrical practices to facilitate the interaction between communities. The project used performative space (a stage or a makeshift workshop space in a school) as a communal place that can transform 'strangeness' - a condition affecting many migrants' experience of their new home and the new home-community's experience of the migrants themselves - into familiarity. The use of documentary and verbatim theatre has enabled a process of interaction between communities (Polish, Chinese, Filipino and Syrian) involved in a process of testimonial gathering, and theatrical workshops, providing a platform for marginalised communities to talk about their experiences of home and homemaking and to be represented through the theatrical medium in the play. Thus, the process of research in the making of the play has created impact from the outset by benefitting the migrant communities themselves, embedding and embodying ideas of home from Bahun's initial research; subsequently shaping the educational resource pack [R5].

### 3. References to the research [can be provided by the HEI upon request]

**R1.** Bahun, S. 2015. 'Transitional justice and the arts: reflections on the field.' In: Corradetti, Claudio and Eisikovits, Nir and Rotondi, Jack, (eds.) *Theorizing Transitional Justice*. Ashgate. ISBN 13 9781472418296

**R2.** Bahun, S. and Petrić, B. 2018. *Thinking Home: Interdisciplinary Dialogues*. Bloomsbury. Second edition: Routledge 2020. ISBN-10 1350062340

**R3.** Sanja Bahun, "“Schloßgeschichten werden erzählt?”: Franz Kafka and the Empty Depth of Modernity," in *Modernism and Melancholia: Writing as Countermourning* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013/14), pp. 111-153. ISBN – 9780199977956

**R4.** Mazzilli, M. *Priority Seating* script: stage reading at the Mercury Theatre 17 November 2017. Script available from the HEI on request. Link to the reading of the full play: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOhhOt-p8F4&feature=youtu.be>

**R5.** Schools' toolkit on the *Thinking Home* website. Downloadable resources (available from the HEI on request) include:

- 1) *Human side of migration and thinking home* information sheet with details of Bahun and Petric's book [R2] and Mazzilli's play [R4] and link to the full play reading (see above)
- 2) *Human side of migration and thinking home* Lesson plan for primary schools
- 3) *Human side of migration and thinking home* Lesson plan for secondary schools

<https://thinkinghome.org.uk/toolkit.php>

**G1.** Bahun, S. *Home and Modernism*. Leverhulme Trust. October 2017 - September 2018.

£48,316

**G2.** Mazzilli, M. *Priority Seating*. Arts Council England Grant for the Arts. September 2017.

£10,500

#### 4. Details of the impact

Mazzilli's play *Priority Seating* **gave voice to the experiences of migrant communities in North Essex, enabling greater appreciation in the wider community of what it means for them to feel 'at home'**. Drawing together stories and experiences from 30 interviews with people from Filipino, Syrian refugee, Chinese and Polish communities, the play explores the themes of migration, travel and identity in their journeys to a place they can finally call home. Refugee Action commented '*having witnessed the sensitivity with which Mary spoke with clients of ours, allowing them to share what they felt able to about their journeys, here it continued into the honesty of the play. I recognised the voices,*' **[S1]**. The participants were central to the conception of the play and the creative practice, informing the development of the script through workshops exploring the first draft; subsequently, a core group of 10 interviewees participated in theatre workshops which informed the writing and artistic creation of the final draft performed as a staged public reading at the Mercury Theatre, Colchester (November 2017) **[R4]**.

The reading was followed by discussion with a panel of specialists including the core group of interviewees, **changing public perceptions of migrant communities' experiences of identity, home and belonging** by facilitating dialogue between the participants, the public and local councillors. One councillor acknowledged the need for a more cohesive local community: "*Integration. All over the UK people divide themselves in communities where they are comfortable... That is the thing that stood out for me. If we could do more as local authorities and as the 2 governments to encourage their integration. There are some groups who don't want to, we have to respect that... where there is the opportunity that is the responsibility of local authorities to make sure when people come to your Borough that there is an opportunity to welcome the group, to learn the language and to become fully become part of the community*" **[S2]**.

*Priority Seating* **exploited the capacity of theatre to facilitate interaction between communities, developing a new creative practice by embedding cross-cultural participation in a process of theatrical creation**. A British Chinese theatre freelance theatre director commented that it is very unusual to have members of several migrant communities being represented on the same stage, talking to one another: '*I would say what is innovative about this play is that it brings together various communities and considers the interrelation between minorities, which is something that is currently not seen at all on the British stage*' **[S3]**. Further, Bahun and Mazzilli's conceptualisations of home and home-making **[R2, R4] have directly influenced artistic practice**; for example, a local Syrian writer has been more explicitly encouraged by the idea of 'home as affect': "*Approaching the topic of home I was in a Janus-like situation, for home is what we like (it is we, our memories, a way of life, our source of experience...) but it is also restrictive and inhibiting in many ways as well. In other words, the Book Festival and your research enriched my thinking and challenged my approach positively.*" **[S4]**.

Bahun and Mazzilli's work exploring the dynamic interaction between an individual's perception of home and community-building, especially in adverse personal circumstances **[R1, R2]** resonated with audiences at the Holocaust Memorial Day event at First Site Gallery, Colchester (January 2018). A public screening of video excerpts from the staged reading **enabled a more nuanced understanding of the complex cultural and social relationships in local community networks**: "*The excerpts raised complex issues about relationships between different migrant*

*populations, whereas, in my experience, discussions about migration are almost always about relations between migrants and the native population. I think that was eye-opening for a lot of us. The response to her performance was very positive. There is a lot of interest in the local community in having Mary present her work in other community events about tolerance and inclusion” [S5].*

Mazzilli and Bahun’s work **brought the voices and experiences of migrant communities to new audiences** through media interviews [S6]; the launch of *Thinking Home* at the county-wide Essex Book Festival (March 2019) [R2, S7] and Mazzilli’s partnership with Mercury Theatre, Colchester, beginning in 2017. In May 2020 their Creative Director testified that: “*Following from Mary’s reading the theatre has programmed shows such as Borders by Henry Naylor and Silence by Nicola Werenowska, which reflect the capacity of Mary’s play in attracting a more diverse audience to the theatre [...] Discussions about a possible co-production for a regional tour of her play Priority Seating and a virtual/digital theatre festival this summer with a focus on diversity and issues of home and community building are on-going right now and see Mary’s involvement to be at forefront of the planning*”. [S8]. Unfortunately the events planned for the summer of 2020 have been postponed for the foreseeable future due to Covid-19.

*Priority Seating* and Bahun’s theoretical perspectives on home [R2, R4] **changed teaching practices and enhanced teachers’ perceptions of issues of displacement and migration, strengthening expertise in the teaching of performing arts, the creative writing curriculum and the citizenship curriculum**. New educational materials [R5] were developed to help students understand experiences of migration, home and cultural identity, and workshops delivered to 150 pupils from years 6–13 at six schools across the region that had either a strong interest in the performing arts and/or had a highly ethnically diverse student population: one session for Colchester Sixth Form A’ level students coming to University of Essex (October, 2018); one session held at Clacton Academy Performing Arts students (February, 2019); three sessions at Ipswich academy (June, 2019); a session at St John Green Primary School (June, 2019) and three sessions at Harwich High school (February, 2020). Workshops with A Level and GCSE students were discussion-led, with pupils examining and performing extracts from the play. Primary school pupils watched extracts from the play and wrote their own dramatic responses.

Teachers from St John’s Green Primary School stress the significance of the educational material in shaping active and creative engagement and influencing new thinking about home and identity: “*...the workshop had a significant impact on my own teaching practice. I already understood how important it is to expose young people to issues of identity, and to elicit thinking about home and migration, but after the workshop I realised that it is possible to actively engage pupils at a very young age in responding to such topics, not only by asking them to think about these topics but also by imaginatively responding to the topic through creative activities.*” [S9].

At Ipswich Academy, a school with a large number of migrant students, the workshops helped the teacher to gain a deeper understanding of her own students. “*As a teacher, by listening to students’ thoughts and observing how they responded to the material covered, I gained a better understanding of the students’ situation and this helped to develop my sensitivity to their cultural and social realities as children of migrant families. The workshop also made me more aware that using material that was so relatable to the students’ experiences enhances engagement and learning. The combination of Professor Bahun’s theoretical perspectives and Dr Mazzilli’s play inspired by real life experiences of migration modelled a unique approach to expanding people’s understanding about the complex nature of home and identity*” [S10].

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

**S1.** Testimonial from Refugee Action

**S2.** Extracts from interviews with local Councillors after the staged reading of *Priority Seating* at the Mercury Theatre (performance November 2017, interviews January 2018)

**S3.** Testimonial from freelance theatre director and audience member

**S4.** Testimonial from Syrian writer

**S5.** Testimonial from Holocaust day organiser

**S6.** Links to BBC Essex interview:

<https://soundcloud.com/uniofessex/mary-mazzilli-priority-seating>

<https://thinkinghome.org.uk/pastEventsLinks.php>

**S7.** Launch of Thinking Home at Essex Book Festival, March 2019

<https://essexbookfestival.org.uk/event/thinking-home/>

**S8.** Testimonial from the Creative Director of the Mercury Theatre, Colchester

**S9.** Testimonial from St John's Green Primary School, Colchester

**S10.** Testimonial from Ipswich Academy