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As Long as There Is Art: Co-Creating Voice and Resilience Amid the Institutional Gap in the Humanitarian Margins of Displacement

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Abstract

Co-authored by a French humanitarian anthropologist and a South Sudanese refugee and environmental activist, both writers situated across the Global North and South, this article argues that artistic practices in displacement operate as infrastructures of survival, whose conditions of existence are both enabled and constrained by external actors. Drawing on a case study of Tongogara Refugee Settlement, it argues that the arts—and, more broadly, knowledge production—constitute key survival mechanisms across psychological, psychosocial, and identity-related dimensions. This article further shows that artistic practices in displacement are not only autonomous expressions of resilience but also mediated cultural forms whose visibility and meaning are co-produced through humanitarian, institutional, and epistemic regimes—including the regimes of academic writing itself. First, we examine art's three interrelated survival dimensions: psychological (personal coherence amid uncertainty and symbolic mobility), psychosocial (collective bonding and mutual support), and identity (cultural representation, memory, heritage, and self-definition in displacement). Second, we examine how these functions are shaped by interactions with external actors—including humanitarian organizations, donors, cultural platforms, and academic institutions—that may increase visibility while favoring curated representation over sustained artistic development, reflecting broader donor-driven logics of accountability. Third, drawing on reflexive notes from the co-authorship process, we show how academic narration can reproduce these asymmetries, thereby positioning co-creation as both an ethical practice and an epistemic condition of equitable knowledge production. Drawing on humanitarian anthropology, aesthetics, and decolonial epistemologies, we argue that processes of symbolic and cultural reconstruction remain structurally under-institutionalized, circulating across humanitarian, developmental, and epistemic regimes without being fully claimed by any of them. Rather than offering normative prescriptions, the article traces how co-production itself becomes a site where these asymmetries are reproduced and made visible.

Keywords: art; refugee camps; refugee settlements; symbolic survival; co-authorship; north–south asymmetries; institutional gaps; decolonial epistemology

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1. Introduction

In 2022, Stephen Pech Gai, commonly known as Gawaar, was developing the community-based, climate-focused organization he founded while living in Tongogara

Refugee Settlement in Zimbabwe, and Lucie Friedrich was conducting a rapid qualitative research on mental health for a humanitarian organization. Their encounter emerged at the intersection of these trajectories and sparked collaborative writing on art in displacement—revealing the persistence of asymmetries of voice, even in decolonial work. Over time, we accompanied each other's articles, reflections, and book projects, articulating art's place amid exile. Yet this process exposed the structural challenge: parallel narratives were not enough. Shared, negotiated authorship was required. While displacement scholarship primarily focuses on protection and basic needs, refugees also sustain everyday life through artistic and creative practices that remain insufficiently examined.

Humanitarian "resilience" events may create meaningful moments of visibility and collective recognition. Yet, because they are usually embedded in institutional formats shaped by short-term programming and public accountability, they do not necessarily engage with refugees' autonomous uses of art for survival, mobility, and self-determination.

We argue that artistic practices in displacement operate as infrastructures of survival; yet the conditions of existence of these practices are partially co-produced within humanitarian and epistemic frameworks that both sustain and shape them. We call for a more equitable space for the arts within the epistemic and institutional infrastructures that govern life in displacement.

This first joint text moves beyond writing about displacement art to writing through it, adopting a form that foregrounds epistemic asymmetry as an analytical object in itself. In doing so, it treats artistic practice not only as a site of representation but as a lens through which to rethink sovereignty, visibility, and the conditions of possibility of knowledge production in contexts of forced displacement.

Scholarship on forced migration has long demonstrated that "the refugee" constitutes not only a legal or humanitarian category but also a representational figure produced through institutional knowledge practices. Classic critiques highlight how humanitarian discourse depoliticizes displacement and renders refugees legible primarily as objects of care and management, often at the cost of historical and political specificity. As Malkki (1996) argues in her seminal essay on refugees, humanitarianism, and dehistoricization, "the forms typically taken by humanitarian interventions (. . .) focus on refugees as their object of knowledge, assistance, and management." This representational logic emerges not as an inevitable fact of efficient emergency support but rather as the outcome of historically produced, standardized ways of talking about "refugee problems" (Malkki 1996) that circulate across agencies, governments, journalism, and media.

Anthropological work on humanitarianism similarly emphasizes how certain forms of suffering become recognizable, governable, and fundable. As Didier Fassin argues in his analysis of humanitarian reason, contemporary humanitarian action often operates through moral frameworks that define which lives deserve protection, care, and visibility within global regimes of compassion (Fassin 2011). From a Global South perspective, refugee studies has faced criticism for its geopolitics of knowledge production, where conceptual authority and publication access remain unevenly distributed, and experiences produced in the Global South are frequently mediated through epistemic grammars that remain more institutionally validated within Northern academic and humanitarian circuits. These debates directly inform our emphasis on narrative sovereignty and co-authorship as both an ethical and methodological stance.

Within this broader landscape, scholarship on creative practice has increasingly moved beyond framing art as mere "expression" or "therapy," instead approaching it as a domain where subjectivity, political recognition, and social worlds are actively negotiated. Research on refugee theater and performance has examined how artistic encounters are shaped by crisis framings and global regimes of representation, particularly the tension

between visibility and containment. In parallel, critical theory on aesthetics maintains that art is never external to politics: it participates in reorganizing what can be seen, said, and recognized within the public sphere—what Jacques Rancière conceptualizes as the "distribution of the sensible," or "a system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it." (Rancière 2004).

These approaches illuminate why camp-based or settlement-based artistic practices are never neutral. They hold potential to open spaces for new forms of collective presence while simultaneously risking being mobilized as curated displays of "refugee culture" under institutional gazes. Our analysis of Tongogara Refugee Settlement practices navigates this tension precisely.

The analysis develops three interrelated dimensions.

The first analytical thread conceptualizes art as an infrastructure of psychological, psychosocial, and identity survival in contexts of displacement. Drawing on case studies from Tongogara Refugee Settlement, we show how artistic practices sustain affective coherence, social belonging, and processes of identity formation under conditions of structural uncertainty.

Rather than framing these practices as individual resilience, we argue that they constitute collective and situated infrastructures of livability. In this sense, art functions as a medium through which displaced lives are maintained, reassembled, and made temporarily inhabitable.

The second thread examines how this infrastructural function of art is partially shaped, enabled, and constrained by external actors operating within humanitarian and donor-driven regimes. These actors—humanitarian organizations, funding bodies, and cultural intermediaries—introduce specific logics of visibility, accountability, and legibility that condition how artistic practices are supported and recognized.

While such engagements can provide resources and visibility, they also tend to privilege forms of artistic expression that are easily observable, reportable, and aligned with institutional expectations. As a result, artistic practices are often situated within uneven economies of recognition, where their value is simultaneously affirmed and instrumentalized for physical survival.

The third thread shifts the analysis to the academic field itself, examining how knowledge production about refugee art constitutes another layer of mediation. Far from being a neutral space of description or a separate topic, academic writing participates in the production, framing, and circulation of narratives about displacement and artistic practice.

We suggest that academic regimes are not external to the logics that shape the visibility of expression in contexts of displacement but rather extend and reproduce them through both the documentation of artistic practices and processes of knowledge production. Indeed, they can reinforce epistemic hierarchies that privilege certain forms of analysis over situated knowledge, producing a second-order form of violence: the extraction, reformatting, or displacement of meaning within scholarly representation itself. In this sense, the academic field does not merely document artistic or expressive survival; it participates in defining the conditions under which it becomes legible. This tension lies at the heart of our argument: while art and knowledge production can function as a lifeline and a scaffold for coherence in contexts of displacement, they risk being instrumentalized as an aesthetic response to externally defined needs rather than those articulated by displaced people themselves. We therefore suggest that academic knowledge production must be understood as a constitutive site in any analysis of the arts in displacement.

Together, these three threads show that survival through art is not self-contained but continuously co-produced across humanitarian and epistemic regimes of mediation.

As Rockhill notes in his introduction to Rancière's The Politics of Aesthetics, the latter's broader corpus repeatedly raises the following question: "From what position do we speak and in the name of what or whom?" (Rancière 2004, trans. Rockhill). Drawing also on recent scholarship on arts-based co-creation (Drop et al. 2024; Maiorano et al. 2024), we position our polyphonic approach within contemporary decolonial methodologies.

Beyond these three analytical threads, our argument points to a broader institutional gap in the governance of displacement: while humanitarian, development, and diplomatic systems address survival, livelihoods, and status, far fewer institutional frameworks are mandated to sustain the symbolic, cultural, and psychic reconstruction of life in exile. In practice, humanitarian actors may seek to respond to such gaps when they observe them, yet these domains often extend beyond the logics of emergency response and therefore exceed the institutional capacities through which such responses are organized.

Methodologically, this format seeks to render the conditions of speaking visible rather than smoothing them over. We approach co-writing as a practical experiment in epistemic redistribution—not a definitive solution to structural inequality but a disciplined practice of accountability across asymmetrical terrains. Chimni's critique of the geopolitics of knowledge production in refugee studies (Chimni 1998) finds a partial and situated response in our co-authorship, where Stephen's situated analysis from Tongogara contributes theoretical framing alongside lived experience, rather than being positioned solely as an empirical "informant".

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of this article is not to present empirical material followed by detached analytical commentary but to articulate lived experiences and situated reflections through a co-produced form of writing. Our approach treats knowledge production itself as part of the field of inquiry, particularly in contexts where voice, legitimacy, and interpretation are unevenly distributed.

Our material consists of multiple intertwined sources: case-based observations from Tongogara Refugee Settlement, ethnographic field notes, situated reflections, and iterative co-written exchanges between the authors. These are complemented by scholarly literature that situates our analysis within debates in humanitarian anthropology, forced migration studies, and aesthetics. Rather than separating data, interpretation, and theory into distinct stages, we work through their entanglement.

Methodologically, we adopt a qualitative, narrative, and dialogic approach. Narrative is not used as an illustration but as a mode of analysis that makes visible relations of power, interpretation, and positionality. In this sense, writing is both the site and the instrument of inquiry. As Jackson argues, storytelling is not merely representational but epistemological, as it mediates relations between self and other and reveals the tensions embedded in meaning-making (Jackson 2002).

2.1. Author Standpoints and Positionalities

Our collaboration brings together distinct histories, forms of expertise, and degrees of proximity to Tongogara Refugee Settlement.

Stephen Pech Gai is a climate activist, refugee-led organization founder, and writer currently completing his memoir based on his own refugee experience. His perspective is that of an insider: a resident of Tongogara with direct, embodied knowledge of the settlement's daily life, constraints, and artistic practices. His analytic insights emerge from long-term immersion.

Lucie Friedrich is an anthropologist, humanitarian practitioner, international consultant, artist, and author. Her encounter with Tongogara occurred through a temporary

but intense field engagement, during a rapid qualitative study on mental health and coping mechanisms. She brings a combined anthropological and humanitarian perspective, enriched by her artistic practice and by a critical understanding of institutional narratives.

These different positionalities generate complementary insights, but they also reveal the structural imbalances that shape research on displacement.

2.2. Asymmetries Shaping the Writing Process

Our writing is conditioned by material, geopolitical, and institutional asymmetries.

Regarding material asymmetries, Stephen writes from within Tongogara, drawing from immediate experience and situated knowledge. Lucie writes from a position with greater infrastructural access, allowing her to manage tasks such as editing correspondence, document structuring, and literature retrieval.

In terms of geopolitical asymmetries, we observe that our collaboration is shaped by different forms of visibility rather than by a simple opposition between "access" and "lack of access." As a refugee writer, Stephen faces structural constraints on physical mobility and on participation in certain Northern academic spaces. At the same time, he is connected to vibrant publication ecosystems within and beyond the Global South, including platforms dedicated to refugee voices, climate activism, and African literary production. Lucie, as a European humanitarian consultant, has access to institutional networks, academic journals, and professional channels that operate according to different logics of visibility and recognition. These ecosystems are not directly comparable in scale or impact; rather, they coexist, overlap, and are differently valued within global knowledge hierarchies. Our co-authorship navigates these uneven yet intersecting terrains.

Lastly, humanitarian and academic narratives have often been produced from outside the contexts they describe. Although this pattern is increasingly contested through more collaborative, reflexive, and locally grounded approaches, its effects remain present in contemporary knowledge production. Rather than simply denouncing this dynamic, our objective is to render it visible and work within it with as much transparency as possible.

Recognizing these asymmetries does not resolve them, but it informs the ethics of our co-authorship and the methodological stance of this article.

2.3. Co-Writing as Method

The co-writing process constitutes a central element of our methodology. Lucie identified the call for contributions and managed initial editorial exchanges due to practical constraints, including Stephen's concurrent project commitments and variable communication access. Writing occurred through shared documents, where Lucie—drawing on her academic background—proposed the initial structure and overall architecture, while Stephen produced substantial primary writing grounded in lived experience. Both authors then engaged in iterative revisions, reflections, and reframing of structure and content, integrating insights from Lucie's fieldwork with Stephen's long-term immersion in Tongogara. We alternate between differentiated authorial voices and a joint analytical voice when synthesizing shared interpretations.

Stephen led the empirical core of the article and shaped the main arguments of Sections 3.1 and 3.2. He provided the principal case studies from Tongogara and the insider analysis that structures the argument on the arts as survival infrastructure, insufficiently addressed by institutions, which is the central claim of the paper.

Lucie contributed additional case material and led Section 3.3. She was responsible for the academic framing of the manuscript, including theoretical synthesis, literature integration, and overall structuring.

Discussions and dialogue oriented the reflection and analysis of the material.

Both authors contributed equally to revisions and the overall development of the argument throughout the writing process.

Co-writing thus becomes both a methodological choice and an epistemological gesture: an attempt to write across uneven terrains while acknowledging, rather than erasing, the imbalances that shape the conditions of knowledge production. Analysis emerged through iterative dialogue rather than perfectly equal distribution. However, our effort at epistemic redistribution aligns with what Santos terms an "ecology of knowledges" (Santos 2014), in which, in our case, refugee, humanitarian, and anthropological epistemologies coexist, dialogue, and mutually transform.

Malkki's concept of refugees as "speechless emissaries" (Malkki 1996)—whose accounts face a priori disqualification while policy, relief, and "development" languages claim narrative authority—frames this intervention. Co-writing together with Stephen constitutes a deliberate refusal of such speechlessness: rather than appearing solely as an object of description or testimony, he intervenes as an analyst and co-producer of the concepts through which Tongogara Refugee Settlement and refugee art are understood.

Yet even as we seek to move beyond the "speechless emissary" paradigm, we remain attentive to enduring structural realities: educational opportunities, publication platforms, peer review processes, and citation practices continue structuring whose speech is most readily heard, circulated, and validated.

The peer-review process also contributed to shaping the final manuscript. Requests for stronger theoretical grounding led to a reinforcement of the conceptual framing of the article. At the same time, this process required continuous negotiation to preserve space for more situated, experiential forms of expression, which were central to the initial collaborative design of the text.

In this sense, the revision process made visible a broader tension in academic knowledge production on displacement: the expectation of stronger theoretical integration can, at times, risk narrowing the space available for less institutionally privileged voices and forms of expression. Rather than treating this as a problem to be resolved, we observe it as part of the epistemic conditions through which knowledge is produced, negotiated, and legitimized in academic publishing.

2.4. Data Handling

The material was organized through thematic clustering emerging from both field-based observations and co-written exchanges. Rather than applying a predefined coding framework, we identified recurring patterns related to artistic practice, institutional mediation, and narrative production. These clusters progressively informed the three analytical strands structuring the article.

The observational material used in this article is distinct from the structured research corpus originally produced by Lucie in the context of programmatic fieldwork. It does not derive from systematically collected data designed for institutional reporting or formal analysis within that research framework. Instead, it consists of situated observational notes and reflections generated through everyday presence in the field, recorded alongside, but outside, the formalized protocol governing the earlier research design. These materials emerged through ethnographic engagement rather than structured data collection procedures. This distinction is important in order to clarify the different epistemic and ethical regimes through which knowledge was produced in the same field context.

2.5. Field Context

Tongogara Refugee Settlement, located in Zimbabwe, was originally established in 1984 to shelter Mozambican refugees during the RENAMO conflict. The settlement closed

briefly before reopening in 1998 to accommodate diverse refugees and asylum seekers from across Africa. Today, it hosts multi-generational communities from Central and East Africa—some long-term residents born in the settlement, others recent arrivals—creating a complex human landscape marked by varied origins, histories, and forms of grief. In this article, we will primarily use the term "settlement" to reflect the lived reality of Tongogara Refugee Settlement rather than "refugee camp." While the two terms are often used interchangeably and can both be found in our article, "settlement" generally refers to a more permanent and integrated form of refugee hosting, whereas "camp" tends to evoke a more temporary and emergency-based setting.

Refugee camps and settlements can often be seen as exemplifying Michel Agier's concept of "humanitarian government," functioning as a "space to manage undesirables" through containment, waiting, and administered marginality (Agier 2011). In Tongogara Refugee Settlement, within a framework of protracted uncertainty, where future perspectives often remain confined to settlement life itself due to repatriation challenges and political barriers, a vibrant artistic life emerges autonomously. Community-based practices of music, dance, storytelling, and visual creation serve as vital forces of social cohesion, cultural expression, and psychosocial well-being. These everyday creative expressions—beyond the staged performances for external audiences discussed later—play crucial roles in sustaining collective identity and individual coherence amid structural constraint.

This article emerges from two intertwined temporal and methodological dynamics, each shaped by distinct forms of access. Lucie's contribution draws on a past field engagement in Tongogara that lasted approximately 2 months. The elapsed time since field engagement further enables a reflective repositioning of these observations within broader analytical debates while requiring caution against overextension or retrospective generalization beyond what can be reasonably inferred from situated experience.

Stephen's perspective, by contrast, remains rooted in continuous presence within Tongogara and the settlement's everyday realities. His analysis emerges from sustained immersion, long-term observation, and direct participation in the artistic and social dynamics described.

We sought to transform this temporal divergence into a methodological opportunity. Rather than opposing immediacy against distance, these positions complementarily shape our material's texture, rendering visible different dimensions of displacement, creativity, and representation.

However, our collaboration entailed underlying risks, particularly extractivism. In collaborations structured by unequal access to mobility, publication, and institutional legitimacy—especially those involving refugee contexts—the knowledge, experience, or narrative of the more structurally marginalized author risks subsumption into the analytical or institutional framework of the more academically positioned co-author. Extractivism manifests not only through data extraction but also through subtler dynamics: who frames arguments, who accesses publication platforms, whose voice counts as "analysis" versus "experience," and who ultimately benefits from academic visibility.

No methodological gesture eliminates this risk. Instead, we address it through an explicit authorship structure, shared decision-making, and foregrounding Stephen's analytic voice as central rather than supplementary. Recognizing extractivism as a structural possibility constitutes our ethical stance—not a resolved problem but an ongoing disciplinary practice.

Writing on displacement, art, and refugee communities entails profound representational responsibility. Such work risks reinforcing stereotypes, instrumentalizing suffering, oversimplifying realities, or reproducing humanitarian tropes of resilience or vulnerability. Given our differently positioned standpoints—one from within the refugee settlement,

one from outside—this responsibility proves asymmetrical. Our approach mitigates this through two guiding principles. First, reflexive accountability: each author bears responsibility for their perspective's implications, avoiding universalization while attending to narrative partiality. Second, mutual verification through shared authorship: Stephen ensures depictions of Tongogara remain accurate and non-extractive; Lucie ensures analytical coherence with anthropological and humanitarian scholarship. Representation thus becomes a negotiated collective practice rather than unilateral interpretation.

3. Results

3.1. Art as a Survival Infrastructure

3.1.1. Overview of Arts as a Survival Infrastructure

In refugee settings where psychological support is limited, artistic practices—alongside sports and other communal activities—often become part of the informal architecture that holds people together and maintains a sense of self. They help transform overwhelming experiences into rhythm, pattern, and meaning. Art becomes a space where fear can coexist with imagination and where the self can be held temporarily, transforming the pressures of immediate survival.

3.1.2. Field Observations: Art in Everyday Life—Stephen

Tongogara has a very young population, with about 80% being children and youth, and this has shaped artistic practices in the settlement. The strong interest in artistic activities is clear in art forms such as poetry, modeling, and hip-hop dance, which attract large audiences and are popular among young people. Even though art is often not taken seriously or given much support, some singers from the settlement have managed to grow and reach national and regional levels. Their songs are followed by many young people, mainly through social media platforms, after some well-to-do artists migrated to the city or resettled.

Young people have also shown that art can bring in some income, though limited in a refugee setting. In Tongogara, groups of youth organize modeling shows for girls and young men. These events are usually held in a community hall that can host a good number of people. Audiences attend by buying tickets. Sometimes, the group saves part of the money to support and grow their activities.

Young refugees involved in poetry and other forms of writing have also found online platforms where their work is published, and they get paid. Young refugees and creative artists have also devised innovations that offer community-based solutions. The co-author of this article, with a background in art, leads a community-based organization that focuses on environmental and climate issues. Activities like poetry and drama, led by children and youth at both small and large gatherings, have helped raise awareness about environmental issues in the refugee community and beyond. Drawings that show both harmful and good environmental practices are also used to keep the community engaged with their surroundings.

Traditional dance and singing also show strong support across different cultures in the settlement. Burundian, Congolese, and Rwandan groups often perform during important community events or when welcoming guests. Their performances show their identity in different ways: Burundians wear robes in the colors of their national flag, Congolese performers dress in traditional kitenge fabric, and Rwandans often wear matching outfits. Even though the Burundian community is smaller in Tongogara, their cultural dances attract wide support from others in the settlement. Their performances, accompanied by strong drum rhythms, are enjoyed across different communities.

In places where art is supported, large events are often well organized and well attended. In Tongogara, however, such events are few and only happen a few times a year. Due to reduced global aid funding, large gatherings are now rare.

3.1.3. Field Observation (Lucie)

During my fieldwork in Tongogara, art rarely appeared in formal program descriptions, yet it was constantly present in everyday life.

In one section of the settlement (most often called "camp" by its residents), a family had set up informal cinema nights in their yard. A white sheet was stretched between two wooden poles, and benches made of packed mud were arranged in rows. As night fell, people gathered. The equipment was modest, and the image was sometimes unstable, but the attention was intense, and the conversations after the movies were always very passionate. Whether they were documentaries or Hollywood movies, for a few hours, the space shifted: from a domestic yard to a shared place of projection, imagination, and temporary escape.

In other moments, art appeared in more dispersed forms. A young man showed me a notebook filled with handwritten poems, some of which he hoped to publish online. Another was drawing portraits of neighbors, carefully observing details, sometimes working from memory. That person then distributed the drawings to their subjects, which was a way to bond over artistic practices. He also hoped to exhibit his work during events. These practices were not framed as "programs" or "interventions" but as ordinary, necessary activities embedded in daily routines.

What struck me was precisely this paradox: art was everywhere, yet institutionally almost invisible. It circulated through informal spaces, personal initiatives, and collective gatherings without necessarily being recognized as part of what sustains life in the settlement, and when it was, it presented a number of challenges. This gap between presence and recognition became central to our analysis.

3.1.4. From Observation to Analysis: Art as Survival Infrastructure

The observations above illustrate how artistic practices operate as infrastructures of survival across interrelated dimensions in a context of displacement.

Drawing on Klinenberg's (2018) concept of social infrastructure as the networks and spaces that sustain social life and collective resilience, we extend this framework to contexts of displacement, proposing the term "survival infrastructure" as the assemblage of material, social, symbolic, and affective practices that make life inhabitable under conditions of precarity. In contexts of displacement, it includes not only basic material systems (food access, shelter, and healthcare) but also less visible yet essential forms of support such as social bonding, cultural expression, narrative continuity, and psychological stabilization.

Unlike humanitarian services, survival infrastructures are often informal, distributed, and locally produced, emerging through everyday practices rather than institutional design. They are not separate from life under precarity but constitute the relational and symbolic conditions through which life remains inhabitable over time.

At a psychological level, art provides a means to sustain coherence in contexts marked by uncertainty and constraint. The poetry notebooks, the drawings, or the improvised cinema nights all create spaces where individuals can process experience, project themselves elsewhere, and momentarily reconfigure their relationship to the present. These practices do not remove hardship, but they allow it to be held, transformed, and sometimes narrated. In this sense, art functions as a form of symbolic mobility (Barriendos Rodríguez 2010) which refers not only to the positional change of bodies in space, but also to the displacement of "social representations and the very power of individual self-representation". Even where physical movement is restricted, imagination and self-expression open alternative horizons.

At a psychosocial level, artistic practices contribute to the maintenance of collective life (Drop et al. 2024). Events such as modeling shows, dance performances, or informal cinema nights bring people together, creating shared rhythms and occasions for gathering. They generate forms of mutual recognition and belonging that are not reducible to humanitarian categories of assistance. Rather than being individual coping mechanisms, these practices

operate as relational infrastructures, sustaining social bonds and collective presence within the settlement.

Finally, at an identity and cultural level, art plays a central role in the preservation and transformation of cultural forms in displacement. The performances described by Stephen, with their distinct dress, music, and choreography, do not merely reproduce traditions; they actively rearticulate them in a context of exile. Through these practices, communities maintain connections to memory and heritage while renegotiating their place in the present. Art thus becomes a site where identity is not only preserved but continuously reconfigured.

Taken together, these dimensions show that art is not peripheral to survival but constitutive of it. However, as the relative invisibility of many of these practices suggests, this infrastructural role remains only partially recognized within formal humanitarian frameworks. This gap points directly to the second dimension of our analysis: the ways in which these practices are mediated, enabled, and constrained by external regimes of visibility and support.

3.2. Humanitarian and Institutional Mediation of Artistic Survival

3.2.1. Overview of Humanitarian and Institutional Mediation of Artistic Survival

Framing artistic expression primarily as a coping mechanism has limitations: it risks obscuring the complexity of these practices and, at times, casting them into roles that reproduce symbolic or representational forms of violence. Stephen's contribution below offers a lived perspective on this dynamic, illustrating how art circulates in Tongogara not as a luxury but as a vital practice of coherence making and spiritual resilience—while also revealing the tensions and limits of this function. It demonstrates how the arts as survival infrastructures are co-produced across multiple actors and regimes of visibility—including displaced communities themselves, humanitarian organizations, and broader political and epistemic systems—which simultaneously enable, shape, and constrain them.

3.2.2. Field Reflection: Art Is a Tool for Personal and Social Healing—Stephen

Despite its immense power to augment mental well-being, solidify and revive social fabric, art in all its forms and practices is among the most alienated in refugee settlements. Entertainments like dancing, poetry and singing symbolically appear at public gatherings as part of the formalities, with those performing them going home unappreciated. This crucial area of societal importance, nevertheless, has opportunities at its disposal but is deeply underdeveloped and ignored.

While the arts are a powerful tool to raise consciousness and bring about emancipation of those kept at the margins of society, one might question whether, in some contexts, artistic performances risk being mobilized in ways that inadvertently sustain existing power hierarchies.

Much of the perception of what is truly needed by forcefully displaced people has been squarely focused on protection. Investments that build the artistic expression of the displaced community remain too often untapped.

Humanitarian organizations, due to their mandate and the institutional systems within which they operate, sometimes mobilize resources for social events where artistic performances take place, yet long-term investment in artistic development remains limited. Beyond programmatic frameworks that tend to address beneficiaries collectively—which is legitimate within the perspective of a humanitarian mandate—fewer resources are directed toward developing the potential of individuals who demonstrate promising artistic talent. This can contribute to narrowing the opportunities for talented artists from displacement contexts—particularly those from the Global South—to gain visibility and access to broader cultural platforms, which remain unevenly distributed within global artistic infrastructures.

While Internet connectivity has opened up avenues for artists to thrive, artists from the displaced community face a double-edged lack of opportunity. The lack of ownership and tools to enable artistic development at public buildings in refugee settlements constrains their potential further.

This is the reality of Tongogara Refugee Settlement in Zimbabwe, home to one of the most diverse and rich cultures in the world, with the Congolese forming an estimated 75% of the camp population, followed by the Rwandan and Burundian communities. The Rwandan and Congolese rich cultural dances glorify the most attended social gatherings, World Refugee Day, bringing noticeable representatives across diverse disciplines and spheres in Zimbabwe and outside the country. Beautifully performed, marked by the ululation of the spectators, they appeal deeply to everyone's conscience. This not only builds social pride but also attracts investment from outside actors, putting money to ensure refugee resilience. However, even when resources are available, nothing is invested to support the sustainability of these community groups.

Nothing captures human feelings better than artistic expression, nothing relaxes the mind like the melody of a musical performance, and art can be used to fight the challenges faced by forcefully displaced people.

3.2.3. Case Illustration: Youth-Led Attempts to Create Mobility Infrastructures—Lucie

A group of Tongogara adolescents proposed "Tongogara's Got Talent," a camp-wide artistic competition culminating in the online dissemination of winning performances via YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Their ambition extended beyond entertainment: it sought to create an alternative pathway to global visibility, circumventing institutional gatekeeping and the bureaucratic opacity of humanitarian programs. Conceived as a self-directed mobility mechanism, the project sought symbolic and digital movement where physical mobility remained impossible.

The initiative emerged organically from the youth themselves, without external prompting. During informal camp discussions, they had observed how World Refugee Day performances—as Stephen describes—offered ephemeral, high-level recognition without sustainable trajectories. The project "Tongogara's Got Talent" aimed to reverse this logic: locally selecting talented individuals, professionally presenting them through digital platforms, and building an autonomous showcase accessible to international programmers, music labels, or online festivals.

Organizations expressed interest in funding discrete aspects (such as sound equipment and internet data), but no sustainable support structure materialized. Momentum faded without technical or administrative accompaniment. This case reveals both the settlement's extraordinary creative agency and the structural limits preventing such initiatives from becoming enduring platforms.

It exemplifies the broader pattern analyzed throughout: art generates visibility and aspiration, yet institutional environments rarely enable these to materialize as recognized artistic careers or tangible mobility. Beyond providing a spectacle for external audiences, this self-organized platform sought self-achievement while also offering the possibility of establishing a political presence through digital dissemination—echoing Jeffers' chapter title, "Take up Space and Making a Noise," which describes refugee activists in host societies (Jeffers 2011). As with those cases, institutional underfunding constrained its potential for autonomous disruption.

3.2.4. From Observation to Analysis: Mediation of the Arts by External Structures

Stephen's reflection highlights how artistic practices circulate within Tongogara as vital forms of social and emotional coherence. Building on this situated perspective, the following discussion explores how these practices intersect with humanitarian programming and broader structures of recognition and visibility.

First, on the aspect of culture and identity. This performative limitation can be seen as a continuum of Bourdieusian "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 2000). Stage performances meaningfully build collective identity and visibility—spaces performers welcome as rare recognition—yet they confine practices to representational functions: curated emblems

of "refugee culture" rather than open fields for becoming. Performances affirm cultural richness while naturalizing hierarchies between performers and evaluators (organizations, donors, and witnesses), and they could be seen as mistaking domination for benign cultural exchange. Stephen observes that World Refugee Day's beautiful Congolese/Rwandan dances "appease investment from outside actors" yet receive no sustainability support.

Lucie witnessed this dynamic at World Refugee Day: artists from all settlement communities performed onstage with stunning energy and creativity peaking. Donors sat in plastic chairs alongside leaders; the rest of the community stood.

Such moments—where refugees channel extraordinary talent within humanitarian event frames—generate vital recognition/resources, yet they can reinforce performer/spectator hierarchies. Events where art, rather than organically emerging from artists within the settlement, is staged and performed within institutionally defined frames can be interpreted as a contribution to "refugeeness" as a representational condition, where cultural expression becomes emblematic rather than self-determined. When a donor-facing aesthetic emerges around settlement performances, cultural vibrancy becomes publicly visible, while deeper psychological vulnerabilities can remain insufficiently addressed. This reflects what Ticktin describes as the moral economies of humanitarianism, in which compassion is structured around forms of suffering that are rendered visible, legible, and administratively actionable (Ticktin 2011). It also echoes Butler's analysis in Precarious Life of how certain lives become publicly grievable and recognizable through spectacular representations, while others remain backgrounded as perpetually precarious (Butler 2004). The issue here is not humanitarian engagement per se, but the broader ecology of visibility, reportability, and fundability in which certain forms of support become easier to stage than others.

Jeffers underlines that refugees tend to be seen by the external world through two extreme lenses only: either they are "gifted" or they are "traumatized" (Jeffers 2011, citing Pupavac 2008). Her schema illuminates this: the specific Tongogara event we described pushes toward the "gifted" pole—vibrant heritage for visitors—while the "traumatized" needs of the same artists (such as counseling) stay sidelined. Unlike Jeffers' analysis of Australian/British refugee theater generating "empathy, solidarity, political action," Tongogara performances face settlement constraints, limiting them to celebratory display rather than critique.

Bennett's "empathic vision" clarifies this aspect: art can open political reflection or serve as a therapeutic proxy, leaving structural distress intact (Bennett 2005). The material from Tongogara Refugee Settlement reveals the difficulty, within emergency-oriented and donor-accountable intervention settings, of holding these possibilities together.

A second tension emerged during Lucie's mental health assessment preceding this article. Refugees consistently articulated accessible psychological counseling as their priority need to "address their traumas" before engaging in other activities. This finding surprised her initial intuition that artistic practices, appearing underfunded and overshadowed by conventional priorities (water, medication, shelter, food), represented the overlooked priority. Fieldwork revealed greater nuance: while art undeniably sustains identity and meaning—and funding artistic groups could strengthen well-being—refugees positioned counseling as foundational and art as complementary.

Despite these explicit recommendations, the organization prioritized arts programming over counseling.

This choice cannot be read as a failure of humanitarian intention; rather, it reflects a broader ecology of intervention in which visible, socially positive, and easily reportable activities may align more readily with donor expectations and accountability formats than long-term psychological care. Seen in this light, arts initiatives can be valuable and

legitimate but also reveal the limits of a donor-friendly ecology in which what is fundable is not always what is most foundational.

The issue, then, is not that humanitarian actors are wrong to support artistic practices, nor that emergency structures should be expected to absorb all dimensions of human reconstruction.

It is that, beyond immediate relief, too few institutional actors are mandated to address the symbolic, cultural, and psychic continuities of displaced life in a sustained way. Artistic practices, in that perspective, reveal a dimension of displacement governance that remains structurally under-institutionalized. The "institutional gap" identified here does not refer to a failure of humanitarian action but rather to a structural absence of clearly mandated institutional responsibility for the symbolic and psychic reconstruction of life in displacement across humanitarian, developmental, and cultural governance frameworks.

Art enters precisely this gap: not as a substitute for counseling and not as a decorative supplement but as part of a broader domain of human rebuilding that remains insufficiently housed between humanitarian response, development programming, and diplomatic architectures.

In this sense, artistic practices function not merely as expressions of resilience but as informal infrastructures of human continuity, sustaining narrative, symbolic, and affective life in spaces where institutional systems are primarily organized around survival.

Yet this tension becomes particularly visible in relation to psychological survival. In many contexts, artistic identity can function as a potential pathway to mobility: cultural visas, artistic residencies, international festivals, and academic or artistic invitations may open forms of cross-border movement that are otherwise inaccessible. In contexts where other horizons appear foreclosed, the possibility that artistic practice might, at some point, enable movement into the world carries significant symbolic and affective weight.

These mechanisms presuppose forms of recognition that refugee artists rarely obtain. Stephen's trajectory illustrates this paradox vividly. Although he is a published author and an active intellectual within Tongogara Settlement, his mobility remains structurally blocked by the loss of academic documents, the invalidity of national papers, and a lack of refugee travel documents—experiences common among the forcibly displaced that prevent access to student visas or educational migration pathways. Artistic visas, in theory, offer alternative routes but require institutional sponsorship, financial guarantees, and forms of cultural validation seldom extended to refugee writers whose work circulates primarily through African or refugee-led platforms.

Some specialized organizations explicitly aim to support artists at risk. One of them assists relocation based on one criterion: being an artist under immediate threat. Another, through online publishing platforms, gives displaced writers space to share experiences in diverse storytelling forms, with payment for their work.

Yet in practice, these programs often mirror the bureaucratic delays and uncertainties of the wider protection and mobility regimes they seek to offer alternatives to. Even in emergency contexts, processing frequently stretches over years, with many applications ending unresolved. Refugees seeking UNHCR resettlement already endure prolonged, opaque procedures, including in-depth interrogations that are often experienced as being framed to increase the likelihood of a "mistake". Status inquiries tend to receive responses only in cases of approval, sometimes years after the initial interview. In this context, the extended maintenance of applicants in states of uncertainty, anticipation, and suspended decision-making can itself produce forms of harm. When artist-relocation schemes replicate these dynamics, promising mobility while delivering uncertainty, they inadvertently perpetuate the very mechanisms of dispossession they intend to alleviate. These schemes, framed in rights-promoting rhetoric, find a useful parallel in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's analysis

of Sahrawi refugees' scholarship programmes in Cuba, which shows how efforts to promote self-sufficiency can also reproduce dependency (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011).

Even advocacy visibility—which can generate conference invitations or cultural events—is still too often shaped by geopolitical asymmetries. Invitations tend to favor artists whose trajectories can be rendered legible within donor-friendly narratives of resilience, talent, or exceptional overcoming, thereby creating hierarchies of cultural legibility among refugee artists. Some artistic identities gain credibility for international mobility; others remain confined to symbolic recognition without material movement. Within Tongogara Settlement, Stephen's literary work reaches broad local, regional, and specialized publication audiences, yet these networks rarely translate into cross-border access. His case illustrates how border regimes differentiate not only citizens from refugees but also artists with institutionally recognizable cultural capital from those whose legitimacy remains marginal. As Mezzadra and Neilson term it, this constitutes "differential inclusion" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013): artistic visibility generates symbolic mobility through representation and networks, yet leaves material exclusion—lost documents, invalid papers, and absent travel documents—fundamentally unchanged.

While De Genova centers spectacles of migrant "illegality," making exclusion visible while sustaining it (De Genova 2013), we observe analogous dynamics in refugee artistic visibility: Stephen's literary recognition circulates as a humanitarian "success" and a spectacle of cultural vibrancy, yet material mobility constraints persist unchanged. Art therefore produces complex, contradictory mobility: expanding visibility and networks while leaving documentary and geopolitical borders intact. This symbolic/material tension illuminates creativity's functioning within displacement, as both a line of flight and a boundary.

3.3. Ethics of Co-Authorship and Narrative Sovereignty: Epistemologies as a Continuation of Externally Shaped Dynamics on Arts

3.3.1. Overview on Ethics of Co-Authorship and Narrative Sovereignty

As shown in the two preceding sections, artistic practices in displacement function as infrastructures of psychological, social, and identity survival while simultaneously being shaped by external humanitarian and institutional logics that both enable and constrain them. The same dynamics of mediation extend beyond artistic production itself into the ways in which such practices are documented, represented, staged, analyzed, and made intelligible. Co-authorship, therefore, does not constitute a separate methodological concern but a continuation of the same infrastructural conditions that structure art in displacement.

3.3.2. Field Voice: Reflection on Co-Authorship (Lucie)

The co-writing process proved both challenging and generative. I proposed the collaboration; Stephen created the starting point of the article with the core case study, and the collaboration developed from there.

All along this process, genuine enthusiasm met practical hurdles: during drafting, Stephen suffered a health issue limiting screen time, and at times, unstable connectivity delayed exchanges. Both of us had a demanding schedule, and I was handling editorial correspondence and structure, which sometimes affected equitable reviewing. Observing this, we decided to set a principle: while I would proceed with requested revisions and rework the text, Stephen would revise and validate or reorient the draft. This dynamic helped maintain alignment but also raised questions: "Is this now my analysis of his story? Are we reproducing precisely what we seek to critique?"

Peer review partially amplified these tensions. Requests for stronger theoretical grounding shifted the balance toward academic conventions, reducing space for the situated expression of Stephen. At times, revision timelines prioritized clarity over full co-leadership. A final shared session clarified our priorities: Stephen stressed art's role in cultural preservation; I emphasized

the need for a more equitable epistemic field. This exchange informed the three-part structure of the article.

We also discussed the positioning of our argument. While I initially aimed to maintain a neutral, observational tone, Stephen argued that the article needed to take a clearer position. By combining these approaches—shaped by different positionalities and risks, one being accused of appropriation, the other of being invisibilized—we restructured the article to hold both voices. This is how, through continuous adjustment, dialogue, and revision, the article took shape.

These constraints, combined with a shared commitment to co-writing, are analytically central: they reveal how academic regimes can reproduce external constraints on artistic expression, often privileging legible theory over a situated voice. Rather than resolving these tensions, we render them visible while maintaining co-creation as a necessary but imperfect practice.

3.3.3. From Observation to Analysis: Ethics of Co-Authorship

Writing together from structurally unequal positions about the arts constitutes not merely a methodological choice but a site of tension, negotiation, and vulnerability. Our collaboration unfolds across asymmetries of mobility, institutional visibility, and geopolitical valuation—conditions determining whether each of us is heard, recognized, or rendered peripheral within humanitarian and academic spaces. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos observes, epistemic violence operates not only through silencing but also through "unequal exchanges" wherein certain voices gain authorization as knowledgeable while others remain relegated to experience or testimony (Santos 2014). This dynamic resonates with the geopolitics of knowledge production in forced migration studies and the unequal distribution of voice versus analysis.

Co-authoring under such conditions demands confronting the risk that collaborative writing might reproduce precisely what it seeks to critique. Four principal risks attend this process: ventriloquism, the appropriation of lived experience, epistemic violence through citation and conceptual hierarchies, and institutional constraints that privilege certain forms of academic expression over others. These risks are formulated as analytical categories distilled from our collaborative experience and our engagement with existing critical debates on representation and co-authorship.

These tensions proved not hypothetical but concretely manifest. Upon departing the settlement and its residents, Lucie frequently encountered requests to "carry their voice"—demands emerging from invisibilization itself. Yet how might one bear a voice without transforming, filtering, or imposing an epistemic grammar? How can one write with, rather than for? How can one resist the gravitational drift wherein the more mobile author becomes the default interface through which the other becomes legible?

Even refugee collaborators—often highly fluent in humanitarian and academic idioms—typically remain positioned as providers of testimony or field legitimacy rather than as co-producers of concepts. This reveals a limit of institutional inclusivity: linguistic and epistemic fluency does not necessarily translate into analytical authority within dominant knowledge regimes.

We claim no resolution of these contradictions. Instead, we render them explicit. This article performs its own theorization: a polyphonic text in which each author is explicitly situated and accountable for their perspective. Our method does not erase inequality, nor does it romanticize difference. Rather, it works through a combination of situated voices and a shared analytical register that allows for conceptual continuity across the text. This involves both moments where authorship remains explicitly differentiated and moments where a unified voice is deliberately used to establish analytical coherence across case-based and theoretical sections.

This entails two additional tensions. First, the interpretive framing must remain carefully articulated to avoid the over-interpretation or appropriation of meaning. Second, no collaborative practice escapes the structural asymmetries that shape its production conditions, nor can reflexivity eliminate inequalities of mobility, recognition, or institutional access. Our co-authorship can thus be understood as a situated form of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2009): a partial delinking from dominant academic grammars that privilege detached analysis over relational and situated knowledge while remaining in dialogue with Santos' ecology of knowledges (Santos 2014).

Narrative sovereignty, within humanitarian and academic contexts, refers here to the capacity to shape the framing, circulation, and interpretation of one's narrative. It implies attempts to resist knowledge structures that differentially authorize certain actors as analysts while positioning others primarily as informants or witnesses. We observe co-writing not as a resolution but as an epistemic practice: one that makes visible the conditions under which knowledge about displacement is produced and that treats asymmetry not as an obstacle to be solved but as the ground on which collaboration must be continuously negotiated.

Recent scholarship on creative co-production situates co-authorship within broader methodological shifts in transdisciplinary and participatory research. Drop's work on co-creation in refugee contexts emphasizes its potential to disrupt "us-versus-them" epistemologies by enabling relational forms of knowledge production and shared authorship (Drop et al. 2024). More broadly, arts-based and visual co-creation methodologies further highlight how collaborative storytelling can redistribute narrative agency and challenge conventional hierarchies of interpretation in research with forcibly displaced populations.

At the same time, implementation-focused studies underline that co-creation processes are shaped by structural and institutional constraints, including time limitations, power asymmetries, and organizational logics that shape what forms of participation are feasible in practice (Maiorano et al. 2024). Our approach builds on these contributions while extending them in a critical direction: rather than primarily framing co-creation as a tool for inclusion or intervention design, we treat co-authorship itself as an epistemic site where humanitarian, academic, and geopolitical hierarchies are reproduced, made visible, and reshaped.

4. Discussion

Returning to the three analytical strands outlined in the introduction, our findings confirm that art in displacement cannot be reduced to expression, therapy, or cultural ornament. It operates instead as an infrastructure of survival—one that is simultaneously enabled, shaped, and constrained by humanitarian, bureaucratic, and epistemic regimes. Across the case of Tongogara Refugee Settlement, creativity appears not at the margins of displaced life but at its core: as a site where meaning, affect, and possibility are continuously negotiated under conditions of structural uncertainty.

Taken together, the three threads—art as a survival infrastructure, art as mediated by external humanitarian and institutional logics, and co-authorship as an epistemic practice—show that artistic life in displacement is never self-contained. It is produced within layered regimes of recognition that determine not only what art can do but also what it can become.

The first strand demonstrates that art functions as a form of psychological, psychosocial, and identity survival. In Tongogara Refugee Settlement, artistic practices sustain affective coherence, collective belonging, and forms of self-continuity under conditions of prolonged displacement. This complicates dominant humanitarian and policy framings of "resilience," which often treat it as an individual trait or an abstract cultural resource. Here, art is not an optional supplement to survival; it is part of the infrastructure through which

life is made livable. At the same time, this infrastructural role is never neutral. Artistic expression is frequently expected to perform visibility, coherence, or cultural legibility, revealing how even survival practices can become entangled in expectations of representation and institutional recognition.

The second strand shows how this infrastructural function is mediated by external actors operating within humanitarian and donor-driven regimes. Humanitarian organizations, funding bodies, and cultural intermediaries introduce specific logics of visibility, accountability, and evaluability that shape how artistic practices are recognized and sustained. These engagements can provide material support and public exposure while also favoring forms of expression that are easily narratable, reportable, or aligned with institutional formats. As a result, artistic practices are simultaneously enabled and reframed through external categories that may not fully correspond to their situated meanings or uses. This tension reflects broader critiques of humanitarian representation, not as a failure of institutions but as an inherent limitation in what can be rendered visible and legible through institutional regimes. Within this configuration, refugee self-representation does not stand outside these dynamics; it circulates within uneven economies of attention and recognition. At the same time, these constraints also highlight what institutional frameworks cannot fully capture: the role of artistic practices in sustaining a broader cultural, symbolic, and affective infrastructure of survival in displacement.

The third strand extends this analysis to the academic field itself, which constitutes another layer of mediation. Academic knowledge production does not merely describe artistic survival; it actively participates in shaping its conditions of intelligibility. Through processes of framing, theorization, and publication, it regulates what counts as analysis, what is positioned as experience, and whose voice is granted epistemic authority. In this sense, scholarly writing can reproduce the very asymmetries it seeks to critique, transforming situated forms of knowledge into abstracted or recontextualized objects of interpretation. The co-authorship process in this article makes these dynamics visible rather than neutralizing them, exposing how academic validation systems remain unevenly distributed and how they structure the circulation of voice and legitimacy.

Across these three strands, a common pattern emerges: survival through art is continuously co-produced through overlapping humanitarian and epistemic infrastructures. Art is neither autonomous nor fully determined; it is held within fields of mediation that simultaneously sustain and delimit it.

The co-authorship process itself constitutes a final analytical layer, revealing how knowledge is produced under conditions of asymmetry. Writing together from structurally unequal positions exposes the differentiated access to academic language, publication infrastructures, and epistemic authority. Rather than resolving these inequalities, the collaboration makes them analytically legible. In doing so, it enacts a form of narrative and epistemic accountability, where authorship becomes not only a site of production but also an object of inquiry. The peer-review and revision process further shaped this dynamic. Requests for stronger theoretical grounding gradually strengthened the conceptual framing while at times reducing the space initially occupied by more situated forms of articulation. This shift itself is analytically significant, as it reflects how academic conventions can shape what becomes visible as knowledge.

Ultimately, the question guiding this article—what does art do in the ecology of displaced life—cannot be answered in singular terms. Art sustains psychological and social life; it produces coherence under conditions of disruption; it generates symbolic forms of mobility; and it enables critique, imagination, and collective presence. Yet it is also embedded in humanitarian staging, institutional expectations, and epistemic hierarchies

that shape its meanings and uses. Its force lies precisely in this ambivalence: it is both infrastructural and contested, both enabling and constrained.

What this analysis ultimately points to is an institutional gap that remains insufficiently named. Humanitarian systems are oriented toward the preservation of life and the management of immediate vulnerability. Development frameworks address livelihoods, infrastructure, and medium-term stabilization. Diplomatic regimes govern status, mobility, and political recognition. Academic logics tend to produce knowledge on displacement, rather than with or by those directly concerned, thereby shaping the conditions under which experiences are rendered analytically legible. Yet between these domains lies a less institutionally defined space: the symbolic, cultural, and psychic reconstruction of life in exile. This includes artistic practice, narrative continuity, and the reconstitution of subjectivity beyond survival alone. The issue is not that existing institutions fail within their mandates but that this dimension of life, and therefore, of artistic or knowledge contribution, is not consistently claimed as a responsibility within any of them.

Supporting artistic life in displacement, therefore, requires more than episodic visibility or representational inclusion. It calls for sustained infrastructures and equitable epistemologies, capable of accompanying artistic trajectories, recognizing displaced artists as cultural producers rather than as symbolic figures of resilience, and supporting creative ecosystems beyond short-term programming logics.

For research practice, this also entails methodological commitments that foreground co-authorship, reflexivity, and the politics of voice. Such approaches do not eliminate asymmetry, but they make it an object of analysis rather than an invisible condition of knowledge production.

Art, in this sense, is not peripheral to displaced life. It is a central site where survival, recognition, and imagination intersect—and where the epistemic conditions of displacement are continuously produced and contested.

5. Conclusions

This article examined artistic practices in displacement as infrastructures of survival, simultaneously psychological, social, and identity, while showing how these practices are continuously mediated by humanitarian, institutional, and epistemic regimes. Rather than treating art as an external expression of resilience, the analysis has demonstrated that it is constitutive of displaced life itself while remaining structurally shaped by the conditions under which it is made visible, supported, and interpreted.

Across the three analytical threads, a central argument emerges: artistic practices in refugee settings are neither autonomous nor merely instrumental. They are co-produced through layered infrastructures of visibility shaped by humanitarian governance, donor-driven regimes, and academic epistemologies that define what can count as knowledge about displacement. In this sense, art is not only a site of survival but also a site where the conditions of intelligibility of survival are negotiated.

The article further contributes to debates on forced migration and aesthetics by reframing resilience not as an individual capacity but as an infrastructural and relational process embedded in social and symbolic ecologies. It shows how the visibility of artistic practices can simultaneously enable recognition and reproduce forms of selective legibility, where certain expressions of displaced life are rendered culturally meaningful while others remain structurally obscured.

Finally, the co-authorship process itself constitutes a key analytical finding. Writing across asymmetrical positions reveals how epistemic authority is distributed, negotiated, and constrained within academic production. Rather than resolving these tensions, the article makes them visible, positioning co-writing as a situated practice of epistemic ac-

countability. In doing so, it underscores that knowledge about displacement is not simply produced in the field but also within the very forms through which it is written, reviewed, and legitimized.

The broader implication of this work is that displacement governance remains marked by an institutional gap concerning the symbolic and cultural reconstruction of life in exile. While humanitarian, development, and diplomatic regimes address survival, livelihoods, and legal status, the infrastructures sustaining narrative continuity, artistic production, and subjective reconstruction remain unevenly institutionalized. Recognizing this gap does not call for the expansion of any single sectoral mandate but for a more sustained engagement with the cultural and epistemic dimensions of displaced life across institutional boundaries.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: While the text draws on observations developed through field experience in a humanitarian context, including a period during which I was involved in qualitative work related to mental health, the present article does not rely on or analyze any data produced within that context. Rather, the situations referenced in the manuscript are mobilized as contextual, experience-based insights informing a reflexive, practice-based and theoretical contribution, combining anthropological analysis and co-authorship. The material presented consists of anonymized, experience-informed observations and narrative reflections, and does not involve systematically collected or identifiable participant data. For this reason, no Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was required for this article, as it does not fall within the scope of research involving human subjects requiring ethical review.

Informed Consent Statement: This article does not rely on formal human subjects research or systematically collected participant data. The material presented is based on anonymized, experience-informed observations and narrative reflections derived from professional field practice. As such, no formal informed consent procedure was required. However, all interactions referred to in this article took place in contexts where individuals voluntarily engaged in open discussions, and no identifiable personal information has been included. Particular care has been taken to ensure that all accounts are fully anonymized and presented in a non-attributable manner.

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