

Expressive Cultural Practices as Mobile Forms of Belonging During Forced Displacement: Ukrainian Refugees in Europe

Expresívne kultúrne praktiky ako mobilné formy spolupatričnosti počas núteného vysídlenia: ukrajinskí utečenci v Európe

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Abstract

Forced displacement involves not only the movement of people across borders but also the relocation and transformation of the cultural practices that travel with them. This article examines expressive cultural practices, such as theatre, music, dance, and visual arts, as mobile forms of belonging that accompany displaced populations and contribute to processes of cultural continuity, psychosocial negotiation, and social re-anchoring in host societies. Drawing on publicly available documentation and selected case studies of initiatives involving Ukrainian refugees across diverse European contexts, complemented by comparative examples from other displacement settings, the article analyzes how expressive practices function as arenas in which identity, memory, and collective experience are negotiated under conditions of rupture and uncertainty. Rather than approaching culture solely as a tool of psychosocial support or socio-economic inclusion, the article situates expressive practices within broader anthropological debates on mobility, heritage governance, and relational belonging, arguing that forced movement entails not only physical relocation but also the circulation of meanings, embodied repertoires, and collective imaginaries through which belonging is reconfigured in displacement.

Keywords

forced displacement, expressive cultural practices, mobile belonging, intangible cultural heritage, Ukrainian refugees

Klíčové slová

nútené vysídlenie, expresívne kultúrne praktiky, mobilná spolupatričnosť, nehmotné kultúrne dedičstvo, ukrajinskí utečenci

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Introduction

Forced displacement is frequently described in administrative and legal terms: numbers of arrivals, border crossings, reception systems, and protection frameworks. Yet displacement is never merely demographic. When people move, entire repertoires travel with them: habits of speech, embodied techniques, artistic vocabularies, gestures of intimacy, and narrative forms that structure everyday life. As René Teijgeler (2006: 135), citing Jiri Toman (1996), observes, “war is not only the enemy of man, it is also the enemy of the best that man has produced.” Movement, therefore, is not merely spatial; it is semiotic and relational. Such an understanding requires a parallel rethinking of culture in displacement contexts. Federico Lenzerini (2011: 101-102) emphasizes that intangible cultural heritage constitutes a “living culture” whose essence lies in its constant recreation in response to changing environments and historical conditions.

Displacement fractures the continuity of such practices. Familiar environments dissolve, institutional categories redefine identities, and the coherence of social worlds is disrupted. Under these conditions, expressive cultural practices, such as theatre, music, dance, and visual arts, acquire renewed significance. They are not decorative supplements to survival but social infrastructures through which individuals reorganize meaning, articulate loss, and negotiate public presence. In this sense, expressive initiatives may function as social anchors that sustain dignity and shared humanity in situations of crisis. (Speiser et al. 2024: 82)

From a socio-cultural anthropological perspective, this article asks: how do expressive cultural practices among forcibly displaced individuals, particularly Ukrainian refugees in Europe, function as mobile forms of belonging that enable cultural continuity, psychosocial negotiation, and relational re-anchoring in host societies? More broadly, what do these practices reveal about the cultural dimensions of forced movement?

The article pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it conceptualizes expressive cultural practices as mobile forms of belonging, extending debates in the anthropology of mobility and heritage. Second, it examines publicly documented initiatives involving Ukrainian refugees across diverse European contexts, complemented by comparative cases from other displacement settings. Third, it situates these empirical cases within broader discussions of humanitarian governance, cultural capital, and intangible cultural heritage (ICH), arguing that expressive practices operate as relational and performative resources embedded within institutional fields and power relations.

This approach is consistent with, but not reducible to, international policy frameworks. The United Nations Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, recognizes that “sports and cultural activities” contribute to social inclusion and well-being (United Nations General Assembly 2018: paras. 44, 84). More recent United Nations reporting emphasizes that “culture is increasingly positioned as a cross-cutting enabler of resilience, social cohesion, and inclusive development” (United Nations General Assembly 2025: para. 3). Such recognitions matter. However, following Didier Fassin’s (2011: 1-3) critique of “humanitarian reason,” it remains necessary to interrogate how humanitarian governance may moralize suffering while limiting displaced persons’ visibility as political and cultural agents.

Rather than romanticizing art as a substitute for legal protection, this analysis conceptualizes expressive cultural practice as a domain where meaning circulates alongside bodies. Movement extends beyond physical relocation to include the circulation of symbols, gestures, memories, and collective imaginaries shaping experiences of belonging in displacement contexts. Expressive practices thus reveal that culture is not suspended by movement; it travels, adapts, and generates new social spaces between displaced and host communities.

Culture, Heritage, and Forced Displacement

A socio-cultural anthropology of displacement has long argued that refugees must not be understood solely as legal categories or demographic flows but as social actors embedded in transformations of belonging, gender, and everyday practice. Within this perspective, theatre, music, dance, and visual arts may be approached as “social historical phenomena which embody man’s expressive capacity at each moment of his development” (Lihamba 1985: 30). Expressive practices are therefore not peripheral to displacement but central to how social actors negotiate life in contexts of forced disruption.

To conceptualize expressive practice as a mobile resource, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986: 243-245) theory of cultural capital remains foundational. Cultural capital exists in embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms and operates as a relational structure of power that can be accumulated and redeployed. Displaced artists do not arrive without histories; they carry embodied skills, professional training, and aesthetic dispositions that they seek to reinvest within host cultural fields. Drawing on Vicki Galloway (1984, cited in Krasner 1999: 79), such navigation demands “proficiency,” understood as the capacity to sustain effective performance across unpredictable contexts. For displaced artists, this entails negotiating unfamiliar “discourse systems” (Krasner 1999) in order to reclaim agency within new institutional environments.

This reinvestment is simultaneously interpretive. As Clifford Geertz (1973: 5) argues, culture consists of the “webs of significance” humans themselves have spun, through which meaning is organized and interpreted. At the same time, culture is not static but what William H. Sewell (2004: 84) conceptualizes as a “dialectic of system and practice,” continually tested and transformed through social action. Displacement intensifies this dynamic, as inherited repertoires are enacted within unfamiliar institutional fields. In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, musical performance has been shown to function as a “dynamic tool” for asserting identity under conditions of cultural transformation (Fabryka-Protska et al. 2024: 5).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines heritage as “constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history” (UNESCO 2003: Art. 2(1)). This formulation foregrounds dynamism rather than preservation-as-freezing, a perspective further supported in heritage scholarship emphasizing the fluid, negotiated, and relational character of ICH (see Giglito et al. 2022; Kruijer et al. 2024). The notion of rooted cosmopolitanism reinforces this view, highlighting how heritage remains simultaneously locally grounded and globally entangled (Versluys, Lilley 2024: 4).

At the same time, heritage governance is structured through institutional rationalities. Laurajane Smith (2006) identifies the “Authorized Heritage Discourse,” through which authenticity and value are defined from above, while Bortolotto’s work (2015; 2020; 2021) illustrates how such frameworks are translated into practice through administrative “contact zones” and bureaucratic processes that shape participation and value attribution.

Embodiment and performativity further clarify why expressive practices matter in displacement contexts. Cultural capital exists in embodied dispositions (Bourdieu 1986), and intangible heritage lives through enactment. Christoph Wulf (2020: 76-82) demonstrates that performative repetition allows cultural memory to be transmitted and transformed; the body functions as a living archive. When displacement moves bodies across borders, it relocates embodied repertoires, including technique, rhythm, and gesture, ensuring that continuity is enacted rather than merely remembered.

Refugee protection scholarship increasingly emphasizes that safeguarding heritage is not ornamental but a matter of dignity and rights. This perspective highlights both the role of ICH as a “protective mechanism” (Neikirk et al. 2024: 118) and the importance of recognizing forms of “refuge heritage” emerging through displacement processes (Al Shallah 2024: 282), building on earlier arguments that cultural protection should be integral to refugee protection frameworks (Lixinski 2018).

Taken together, these strands converge on a central insight: expressive cultural practice is neither decorative nor merely therapeutic. It is a domain in which cultural capital is re-configured, heritage is recreated, institutional rationalities are negotiated, and belonging is actively performed within fields structured by power. Displacement does not suspend culture; it intensifies the conditions under which culture must be enacted and defended.

Methods and Scope

This article is based on qualitative interpretive analysis of publicly available documentation, including journalistic articles, institutional reports, cultural organization publications, and digital narratives describing initiatives involving Ukrainian refugees across multiple European contexts. Rather than concentrating on a single locality, the study adopts a multi-sited analytical logic. It traces how expressive practices circulate across distinct institutional and civic environments.

This approach follows George E. Marcus's (1995: 96) argument that contemporary ethnographic inquiry must sometimes "move out from the single sites and local situations" to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities across dispersed contexts. In line with Marcus's (1995: 105-110) multi-sited strategies, such as following "the people," "the thing," and "the plot", this study tracks displaced artists (the people), expressive repertoires (the thing), and displacement narratives (the plot), while also attending to institutional and governance frameworks shaping their visibility.

Because the analysis relies on mediated documentation rather than direct ethnographic immersion, it draws on Mark-Anthony Falzon's (2016: 2) understanding of multi-sited research as conceptual movement through the juxtaposition of data. This entails comparing representations across sources to identify recurring patterns in how expressive practice is framed, institutionalized, and enacted.

Visual and documentary materials are treated as analytically significant rather than merely illustrative. Marcus Banks (2018: 10, 14) emphasizes that visual data constitute social processes and artefacts in their own right, and that "found images", those already selected and circulated by participants or institutions, offer insight into how social actors represent themselves publicly. Such materials do not provide transparent access to lived experience. Rather, they reveal the narratives through which expressive practices become visible within host societies.

This methodological orientation allows attention to both process and framing. As Jessica R. Goodkind (2006: 82) argues in relation to refugee well-being interventions, qualitative approaches are particularly suited to understanding how participants interpret initiatives over time. While the present study does not evaluate program effectiveness formally, it analyses how expressive practices are articulated as psychosocial, cultural, or professional resources across contexts.

The empirical material examined in this article spans a range of European contexts in which Ukrainian refugees have engaged in expressive cultural initiatives, including but not limited to Germany (Hamburg, Bonn, Monheim am Rhein), Finland (Helsinki), Slovakia (Kežmarok, Bratislava), the United Kingdom (Scotland, Birmingham), Spain (Málaga), Portugal (Lisbon), Luxembourg, and Poland (Rzeszów). These cases are complemented by selected comparative examples from other displacement settings, including Canada, Greece, Australia, Ethiopia, Panama, and Portugal, which are mobilized to illuminate broader analytical patterns rather than to establish systematic comparison.

The selection of sites is not intended to privilege specific national contexts but reflects the availability of publicly documented initiatives that render expressive practices visible across

diverse institutional environments. These include theatres, orchestras, cultural festivals, community-based workshops, non-governmental organizations, and municipal or national cultural institutions. In this sense, the study adopts a multi-sited and multi-institutional perspective, foregrounding the circulation of expressive practices across translocal settings rather than their embedding within bounded national frameworks. This approach is consistent with an understanding of forced displacement as a fundamentally relational and cross-border process, in which cultural practices travel, adapt, and acquire meaning across interconnected social and institutional fields.

This analytical approach is further informed by a reflexive awareness of the author's interpretive positioning. The article proceeds from an understanding that, in contexts of forced displacement, cultural life is often framed through narratives of loss, vulnerability, or deprivation. At the same time, displaced individuals are approached here as active bearers and producers of culture, who sustain, adapt, and transmit expressive practices even under conditions of constraint. This perspective does not deny the structural limitations and inequalities shaping refugee lives but seeks to foreground how cultural practices persist as dynamic and relational processes rather than being suspended by displacement. Given the reliance on mediated sources, this positioning also entails attentiveness to how refugee voices are represented, translated, and framed within journalistic and institutional narratives.

Methodological Limitations

Reliance on publicly available documentation introduces important constraints. Journalistic and institutional sources are mediated representations shaped by editorial, funding, and visibility logics; they may privilege professionalized initiatives or narratives aligned with host-society expectations. This also implies that the voices and experiences of displaced individuals appear in the analysis through processes of selection, translation, and framing. As such, expressions of agency, meaning-making, and cultural production are not accessed directly, but through representational layers that may privilege certain narratives over others. This limitation is therefore not only empirical but interpretive, shaping how expressive practices become visible and legible within the analytical material. The absence of direct ethnographic fieldwork limits access to informal tensions and backstage dynamics. Selection bias is therefore inevitable: the initiatives analysed are those that achieved sufficient visibility to be documented in transnational media or institutional platforms.

These limitations define the scope rather than invalidate the analysis. The study does not claim exhaustive representation of Ukrainian expressive practices in displacement. Rather, it examines how publicly documented initiatives reveal recurring structural and relational dynamics in the circulation of cultural capital, the recreation of heritage, and the negotiation of belonging within institutional ecologies.

By foregrounding circulation rather than locality, the methodology aligns with Noel B. Salazar's (2010: 53-55) call for an anthropology attentive to "cultural mobilities" and the imaginaries mediating movement. The aim is not to produce a comprehensive ethnography of a single site but to identify patterns that recur across multiple displacement settings.

Expressive Practices as Mobile Forms of Belonging

The empirical analysis is organized around four interrelated domains, theatre, music, dance, and visual arts/handicrafts, not as rigid artistic categories but as overlapping modalities through which cultural meaning is embodied, circulated, and institutionalized in contexts of forced displacement. The aim is not to classify genres but to examine how expressive practices operate as mobile forms of belonging across distinct institutional and civic environments.

Participants in these initiatives occupy heterogeneous positions within cultural fields. Some are professionally trained artists whose accumulated expertise is disrupted and must be re-negotiated within host societies; others engage in expressive practice as non-professional participants, mobilizing creativity as a resource for psychosocial negotiation and relational anchoring.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, this differentiation reflects unequal configurations of resources and access to institutionalized cultural fields. Professional artists are more likely to possess institutionalized and objectified forms of cultural capital. Under certain conditions, these can be revalidated within host cultural infrastructures, enabling forms of professional re-entry. By contrast, community-level participants primarily mobilize embodied cultural capital, often outside formal institutional recognition. These practices are oriented toward social connection, continuity, and everyday meaning-making. Displacement, in this sense, reconfigures the convertibility of prior skills and recognition within new institutional settings.

These distinct positions give rise to different modes of belonging: one mediated through institutional recognition and the reactivation of professional trajectories, the other through relational, participatory, and community-based enactments of cultural continuity. Within this analytical framework, comparative examples drawn from other displacement contexts are used selectively as analogical references, allowing patterns observed among Ukrainian refugees to be situated within broader dynamics of forced mobility rather than treated as isolated or exceptional cases.

Expressive practices unfold within broader processes of uprooting. As Elizabeth Colson (2003: 1) notes, forced movement entails dynamics of "labelling, identity management, boundary creation and maintenance, management of reciprocity, [and] manipulation of myth." Artistic initiatives provide arenas in which these processes become visible. They allow displaced individuals to contest homogenizing representations and articulate shared narratives that exceed bureaucratic abstraction.

These practices are embedded within transnational trajectories of movement. Refugees represent a distinct form of transnational forced mobility marked by profound social transformation (Binder, Tošić 2005: 607). Cultural expression is shaped by what Salazar (2010: 53) describes as "metacultural discourses and imaginaries" that mediate how mobility is understood. Expressive initiatives do not merely reflect movement; they actively construct its meaning.

At the same time, participants must be understood as agents rather than passive recipients of humanitarian programming. John Fiske (2013: 171) emphasizes that social actors

are “socially interested agents” who negotiate the conditions they encounter by drawing upon available historical and cultural resources. Expressive practice becomes one such arena of negotiation. Whether through professional reinsertion into established institutions or through grassroots workshops, displaced individuals mobilize symbolic repertoires to reclaim presence and recognition.

The subsections that follow examine how this process unfolds across four domains, considering how expressive practice mediates in situations of imposed instability, reconstructs relational ties, and remains embedded within governance frameworks shaping its visibility and value.

Theatre: Mediated Speech, Social Rehearsal, and Relational Co-presence

Theatre provides a particularly illuminating lens for examining forced displacement because it is both narrative and relational: it stages experience through embodied co-presence and public address. In contexts of rupture, performance enables displacement to be enacted as shared experience rather than abstract condition. In this sense, theatre challenges what Liisa H. Malkki (1992, cited in Salazar 2010: 54) describes as a “sedentarist metaphysics” that binds identity to fixed territory. Presence is asserted not through territorial rootedness but through performative enactment.

The relational dimension of theatre becomes especially significant in situations of social fragmentation. Cecile Rousseau and Aline Drapeau (1998: 465) argue that collective trauma produces “profound changes in the webs of human relationships.” Performance can function as a mode of re-symbolization through which disrupted relations are reconstituted. Drawing on Jorge Semprun, they further emphasize that transmission of traumatic experience becomes possible through symbolic mediation (Rousseau, Drapeau 1998: 469). Theatre thus operates not merely as representation but as a mode of social reconstruction.

This dynamic is visible in grassroots puppetry initiatives organized by Ukrainian refugee women in Kežmarok, Slovakia (Kostas 2024). Refugee children participate in mediated storytelling through puppet characters, externalizing displacement narratives at a symbolic distance. Rather than interpreting this solely as therapeutic intervention, it may be understood as enactment of agency. Wulf (2020: 79) conceptualizes such enactment as a mimetic process through which individuals incorporate external realities into internal imagery, allowing experience to be reworked performatively. Such participatory initiatives also resonate with what Goodkind (2006: 77) describes as the “transferring [of] advocacy skills” to displaced families in order to improve their “access to resources” within new local contexts. Theatre here becomes both expressive and socially enabling.

Theatre further functions as a space of rehearsal across refugee-host encounters. In Slovakia, THEATRA Bratislava’s project *From Letters to Stage* transformed written exchanges between Slovak students and Ukrainian refugees into interactive public performance (Brophy 2025). Multilingualism was framed not as an obstacle but as an artistic principle. The stage became a setting of negotiated recognition, resonating with Michael Herzfeld’s (2016: 7) notion of cultural intimacy, where aspects of shared identity that may be vulnerable in formal settings become collectively intelligible. Through such enactment, participants resist reduction to

homogenizing labels. Susanne Binder and Jelena Tošić (2005: 611) note that the legal term “refugee” can impose a uniform identity upon individuals in exile; theatrical performance destabilizes this abstraction by foregrounding individual voice and narrative specificity.

This reclamation is particularly significant because the aestheticization of displacement may generate what Robert Weller (2017, cited in Chatzipanagiotidou, Murphy 2021: 462) describes as “unspeakability” in relation to personal trauma. Within the performative space of the stage, displaced individuals engage in forms of “memory activism” (Chatzipanagiotidou, Murphy 2021: 463) that confront imposed silence. By sustaining artistic production, they resist pressures to withdraw into victimhood. They instead articulate experiences that bureaucratic and humanitarian systems often leave unaddressed. In such contexts, participants deploy what Salazar (2010: 56) terms “mobility imaginaries,” constructing identifications of self and other that exceed legal categorization.

Professional and semi-professional initiatives further illustrate how theatre reconfigures cultural capital in displacement. In the United Kingdom, amateur Ukrainian refugee actors have staged canonical works such as *King Lear* by William Shakespeare and adaptations of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, asserting continuity with established theatrical traditions while situating present instability within a durable repertoire (Khomami 2024; Refugee Festival Scotland 2025). Performances at the Finnish National Theatre in Helsinki, Finland, a co-production of Ukrainian, German, and Finnish theatres, and productions at Theater Mriya in Bonn, Germany, founded by Ukrainian refugee artists demonstrate how theatrical expertise is reinserted into host institutions (Kansallisteatteri 2025; Theater Mriya Bonn 2025). Such initiatives counter what Isobel Blomfield and Caroline Lenette (2018: 324) describe as the reduction of displaced populations to a “silent and faceless physical mass.” They replace passive imagery with professional authority and aesthetic competence.

Comparative examples reinforce this pattern. The Ukrainian Theatre Group in Calgary, Canada, (Tucker 2024) extends performative continuity among Ukrainian refugees beyond Europe, while theatre initiatives for young refugees from Afghanistan and Iran organized by Caritas Hellas in Athens, Greece, create collective spaces in which participants explore meanings of home across national backgrounds (Caritas Hellas 2019). These initiatives echo Kjell Skjellstad’s (2000: 1-3) observation that performing arts serve as arenas for democratic participation and conflict transformation. Theatre thus becomes a contact zone in which intercultural negotiation is enacted rather than abstractly proclaimed.

Across these contexts, theatre operates as a mobile form of belonging not simply by representing displacement, but by actively restructuring how it is experienced and made visible. By transforming rupture into narratively mediated and collectively enacted form, theatrical practice enables displaced individuals to reposition themselves within relational and institutional fields.

More specifically, theatre foregrounds the mediated articulation of voice and the co-presence of audiences, making it a domain in which belonging is negotiated through public narration, interaction, and recognition. In this sense, belonging in displacement emerges not as a residual attachment to place, but as an ongoing performative achievement, contingent upon the capacity to render experience socially intelligible. Theatre thus reveals how cultural capital is re-articulated through practice, rather than merely preserved, within the shifting conditions of forced mobility.

Music: Disrupted Cultural Capital, Professional Re-entry, and Moral Economies of Listening

If theatre foregrounds narrative co-presence, music foregrounds the movement of professional fields and symbolic capital. For displaced musicians, such upheaval entails not only geographic relocation but also the disruption of institutional networks, audiences, and systems of recognition. Musical practice thus becomes a crucial site where cultural capital is reactivated and revalued in new host contexts.

The formation of the Mriya Orchestra in Hamburg, Germany, by Ukrainian refugee musicians who arrived in early March 2022 illustrates how displaced professionals mobilize accumulated expertise to reconstruct institutional continuity under conditions of rupture (Mriya Orchestra 2024). A parallel example is the temporary relocation of the Kyiv Symphony Orchestra to Monheim am Rhein, Germany (Symphony 2025).

These initiatives are not reducible to symbolic solidarity. By performing at high professional levels within established European concert infrastructures, musicians assert aesthetic authority. They disrupt expectations that displaced artists appear primarily within the moral register of “humanitarian reason” (Fassin 2011: 1–3). In this sense, their presence exposes the asymmetrical frameworks through which displaced individuals are often recognized. Cultural expression risks being interpreted through compassion-driven narratives rather than as the outcome of professional expertise. Following Fassin’s critique, such dynamics reveal how humanitarian visibility may simultaneously acknowledge suffering while constraining recognition of displaced persons as autonomous cultural actors.

These repositioning challenges what Anna Apostolidou (2023: 1) calls “victimizing conceptualizations” of refugee creativity. Professional orchestral performance functions as a counter-narrative to imagery that frames displacement solely through trauma or dependency. As Blomfield and Lenette (2018: 324) note, displaced populations are often represented as a “silent and faceless physical mass,” particularly women and children portrayed as “vulnerable and mute.” By appearing as highly trained professionals on major European stages, Ukrainian musicians replace depersonalizing representations with narratives of competence and artistic authority.

At the same time, musical performance in displacement entails representational negotiation. Maggie O’Neill (2008) conceptualizes art in transnational refugee contexts as “ethno-mimesis,” where biographical experience intersects with aesthetic form. Performance may therefore translate disruption into structured sound without collapsing into spectacle. This dual positioning, professional discipline and lived resonance, allows musicians to sustain artistic authority while engaging collective rupture.

The difficulty of professional reintegration, however, should not be underestimated. Michael Parzer (2024: 104–108) demonstrates that displaced artists frequently confront the challenge of “becoming an artist anew” within host cultural fields structured by symbolic boundaries. Even highly trained musicians may find prior achievements reframed through humanitarian lenses. The convertibility of cultural capital thus depends on institutional recognition and access.

This tension becomes visible in initiatives that frame music as psychosocial intervention. In Rzeszów, Poland, a Ukrainian refugee woman works as an art therapist with refugee children, using music to facilitate trauma processing while simultaneously reactivating her professional identity (USA for UNHCR 2025). In Birmingham, the United Kingdom, the Vinochok Ukrainian Children's Ensemble mobilizes collective music-making to support refugee children's wellbeing and cultural identity while publicly showcasing Ukrainian musical heritage (Writtle 2024). Music here operates within what may be termed a moral economy of listening. It is an arena where recognition, dignity, and artistic authority are renegotiated. While such projects foreground resilience and relational care, they may also reposition musicians within therapeutic frameworks rather than concert settings. As Colson (2003: 10) observes, displacement often compels individuals to navigate institutional expectations of vulnerability. Musicians therefore negotiate between professionalism and humanitarian categorization as part of adaptive strategy.

Parallel cases across contexts confirm this dynamic. The Syrian Expat Philharmonic Orchestra, founded by Syrian refugees residing in Germany, explicitly sought to reshape reductive public images of refugees through musical excellence (Amri 2015). Similarly, the relocation of the Afghanistan National Institute of Music to Braga, Portugal, demonstrates how institutional musical infrastructures can function as portable cultural ecosystems rather than temporary emergency responses (Kassam 2024). In both cases, music sustains collective identity across geographic rupture.

In these musical formations, belonging emerges not simply through continuity of practice, but through the active renegotiation of cultural capital within new institutional and moral economies. The reactivation of musical expertise is contingent upon recognition, access, and the ability to navigate competing expectations between professionalism and humanitarian framing.

More specifically, music foregrounds the re-entry of displaced individuals into structured professional fields, where artistic authority is both evaluated and publicly recognized through performance. At the same time, it operates within a moral economy of listening, in which audiences, institutions, and funding frameworks shape how displaced musicians are perceived and valued. In this sense, musical practice reveals how belonging is produced through the interplay of discipline, recognition, and the capacity to reposition oneself as a legitimate cultural actor within transnational contexts.

Dance: Embodied Memory, Synchrony, and Movement as Heritage

Dance shifts the analytical focus from narrative and professional reintegration to embodiment and synchrony. It offers a particularly direct lens through which to examine displacement, because it is movement itself that generates meaning. As Bourdieu (1986: 243) argues, cultural capital exists in an "embodied state" as durable dispositions of mind and body. Under conditions of forced displacement, bodies cross borders carrying repertoires of rhythm, posture, technique, and habit. Intangible cultural practices are not externally stored traditions; they live through enactment. The body thus functions as a mobile archive.

A substantive illustration of embodied continuity appears in the professional field. In Spain, displaced Ukrainian ballet dancers joined the National Dance Company during the ear-

ly phase of the war-driven exodus (Marlasca 2022). Their entry into an elite ensemble demonstrates how technical training travels with the body. A parallel example emerges in the Netherlands, where the United Ukrainian Ballet Foundation, founded by displaced Ukrainian professionals in The Hague, provides an institutional platform through which dancers sustain rehearsal discipline and collective performance (United Ukrainian Ballet 2025). These examples foreground the portability of embodied expertise. They resonate with Parzer's (2024: 104) observation that displaced artists confront pressures to re-establish legitimacy within new cultural fields structured by symbolic boundaries.

Beyond professional contexts, dance operates as community-based practice through which relational life is rebuilt. In the United Kingdom, Ukrainian community dance initiatives show how shared choreography empowers refugees to rebuild social presence while sustaining cultural continuity within recreated spaces (Williamson 2025). Rather than marking nostalgic attachment to lost territory, such initiatives demonstrate how identity is maintained within translocal circuits.

Dance may also be understood as performative praxis in O'Neill's (2008) sense, an enacted negotiation of the hyphen between past and present, homeland and host society. Through embodied performance, displacement is not erased but mediated. Participants inhabit their bodies not solely as sites of trauma but as sites of disciplined continuity and expressive agency. Synchrony is central to this process. Wulf (2020: 82, 110) emphasizes that coordinated movement generates reciprocal attunement among participants. Through shared rhythm and patterned motion, individuals experience alignment that exceeds verbal articulation, producing what Wulf (2020: 68) describes as a "we-feeling." In displacement contexts marked by fragmentation, such synchrony temporarily stabilizes relational bonds while allowing difference to remain visible.

Similar developments are observable in comparative contexts. In Melbourne, Australia, pre-war Ukrainian community dance groups have seen increased enrolment among newly arrived refugees, demonstrating how coordinated movement functions as a "universal language" facilitating social connection (Brooks 2023). In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, dance initiatives involving Eritrean refugees have been linked to skills development and economic participation (International Labour Organization 2025). In Panama City, Panama, programmes for Venezuelan refugee youth and their Panamanian peers illustrate how structured movement supports inclusion within host environments (Florez 2021). Together, these initiatives reinforce Apostolidou's (2023: 1) argument that collaborative artistic practices foster intercultural learning beyond narrow humanitarian framing. At the same time, dance initiatives often rely on women's organizational labour and intergenerational transmission. Binder and Tošić (2005: 618-619) emphasize the importance of gender-sensitive approaches in displacement contexts, noting that women frequently sustain social and cultural networks during upheaval. Many community-based dance groups reflect this dynamic.

In this domain, belonging is articulated through the body itself, as movement becomes both medium and meaning in contexts of displacement. Dance foregrounds the embodied dimension of cultural continuity, demonstrating that belonging is enacted through repetition, adaptation, and collective synchronization rather than anchored in place. The portability of movement-based knowledge allows displaced individuals to sustain identity

across shifting environments, while shared choreography generates forms of alignment that exceed verbal articulation.

More specifically, dance reveals how belonging is co-produced through synchrony and relational attunement, as coordinated movement fosters temporary but meaningful forms of social cohesion within fragmented contexts. In this sense, belonging in displacement is not only remembered but continuously reconstituted through embodied practice, interaction, and the capacity to move together within new social worlds.

Visual Arts and Handicrafts: Semiotics of Loss, Refugee Heritage, and Public Recognition

Visual arts and craft practices offer a distinct analytical lens. They materialize memory, loss, and continuity in objects and images that circulate across exhibitions and public spaces. In contexts of forced displacement, artistic form itself often encodes rupture. Fragmentation, repetition, layering, and erasure become structural devices through which what resists direct narration is communicated. Artistic production thus addresses how “losing the memory of places, objects, sounds, etc. affects the continuity of personal history” (Lashchuk 2018: 700). By reconstructing lost places through visual arts and craft, displaced artists attempt to restore a sense of self fractured by the destruction of their cultural environment.

Rather than narrating trauma explicitly, visual practices frequently operate through indirection. Iuliia Lashchuk (2018: 706) describes this as “working with personal and family archives,” resisting the “artificial identity” imposed on conflict-affected territories. Through such aesthetic labour, displaced creators counter externally defined labels and reassert narrative authority. Memory is neither erased nor frozen; it is reorganized in artistic form.

Host cultural infrastructures significantly shape what becomes publicly visible. In Málaga, Spain, a Ukrainian refugee woman gained recognition through participation in community exhibitions, presenting her work as emerging from displacement rather than solely from victimhood (Pliego 2022). In the United Kingdom, the Pier Arts Centre in Orkney documented the “personal milestones” of eight Ukrainian refugees, enabling participants to embark on creative journeys while allowing local audiences to encounter the longitudinal dimensions of displacement (Orkney Islands Council 2025). In Lisbon, Portugal, the exhibition *The Beauty Is a Choice* at the Estrela Basilica reframed aesthetic production through the perspective of a displaced Ukrainian professional artist (Figueira 2025). Cultural residencies for Ukrainian refugee artists at ArtRooms in Luxembourg City similarly illustrate how municipal cultural infrastructures provide institutional frameworks that sustain artistic visibility (Rao 2025).

Comparative evidence strengthens this analytical claim. In Australia, the *Beyond Borders* exhibition supported refugee artists from Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, Congo, Burma, and Iraq in asserting professional authorship rather than being framed solely as “sufferers” (SSI 2025). In Salisbury, the United Kingdom, professional galleries have exhibited works created by refugees at the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, demonstrating that prolonged liminality does not preclude sustained cultural production (Bassingham 2025). As Gil Hochberg (2020: 48) argues, refugee history cannot be reduced to a temporary humanitarian episode.

Textile practices provide a particularly powerful example of material continuity. The *vyshyvanka*, the traditional embroidered Ukrainian shirt, functions as a visible marker of collective identity. As Winter Greet (2024: 177-210) argues, it operates as “spiritual armour,” with stitched motifs encoding protection, memory, and resistance. The garment materializes belonging through patterned repetition and embodied wearing. In displacement contexts, embroidery becomes a portable archive: identity is publicly displayed and re-enacted. This dynamic is evident in initiatives such as *Ariadne’s Thread* in the United Kingdom, where embroidery workshops inspired by the *vyshyvanka* bring together displaced Ukrainian women and members of the local Polish community, enabling transmission of technique alongside narration of personal histories (Gupta 2023). Craft practice thus generates shared spaces that are both aesthetic and social.

These developments contribute to what Marco Martiniello and Elsa Mescoli (2024: 1) describe as a “multidimensional integration process,” in which artistic creation facilitates social presence within host societies. Yet such visibility remains mediated by governance rationalities and normative frames of cultural value. Displaced artists may gain recognition, but often within expectations privileging legible forms of “refugee expression,” where the aestheticization of suffering shapes reception. The question is therefore not whether visibility occurs, but under what conditions and through which institutional filters it is granted.

Visual and craft practices should thus be understood as more than aesthetic activities. They operate as reparative sites where culture provides “tools for grieving” (Rousseau, Drapeau 1998: 465) and shapes how trauma is socially mediated. Such engagement addresses “post-migration stressors, such as lack of meaningful social roles... and social isolation” (Goodkind 2006: 77), restoring agency within the host environment. Cultural production must therefore be recognized not as a short-term response to crisis but as part of an ongoing historical formation (Hochberg 2020: 48).

Here, belonging is materialized through objects and images that render displacement visible and socially legible. Visual and craft practices demonstrate how memory, identity, and continuity are reconfigured through processes of aesthetic mediation, in which fragmentation is not only represented but reorganized into communicable form. By translating displacement into material and visual expression, artists render otherwise intangible experiences publicly intelligible while contesting externally imposed narratives of victimhood or passivity.

More specifically, this domain reveals how belonging is negotiated through visibility and recognition within institutional frameworks that shape what forms of expression are legible and valued. Cultural production thus operates at the intersection of personal memory and public representation. Here, displaced individuals assert narrative authority while navigating normative expectations of “refugee expression”. Visual and craft practices therefore highlight both the possibilities and constraints through which belonging is materially produced, mediated, and publicly recognized in contexts of forced displacement.

What Culture “Does” in Displacement, Without Romanticizing It

The preceding analysis across theatre, music, dance, and visual arts demonstrates that expressive cultural practices are not marginal embellishments to displacement but structurally embedded responses to it. When social worlds fracture, institutions collapse, and identities

are administratively reclassified, cultural repertoires do not disappear; they are reactivated, reconfigured, and strategically redeployed. Across diverse European contexts, and beyond, Ukrainian initiatives illustrate how expressive practice operates as a mobile form of belonging, simultaneously symbolic, relational, and institutional. Three interwoven dynamics clarify what culture “does” in displacement.

Although discussed comparatively, the four artistic domains illuminate distinct dimensions of displacement. Theatre foregrounds narrative mediation and the public rehearsal of voice; music highlights the renegotiation of professional fields and the moral economies of listening; dance makes visible the embodied transmission of cultural memory through synchrony; and visual arts and handicrafts materialize rupture and continuity in portable forms. Their convergence strengthens the argument, yet their analytical differences clarify how belonging is reconstructed across multiple registers simultaneously.

First, expressive practice reconstitutes meaning amid social fracture. Displacement fragments professional identity, institutional continuity, and everyday sociality. Expressive forms reorganize this fragmentation into communicable structures. As Versluys and Lilley (2024: 4) note, rooted cosmopolitanism captures the entanglement of local and global dimensions of belonging. Theatre mediates narration; music structures collective listening and professional identity; dance restores embodied synchrony; visual arts materialize memory through travelling images and objects. Across these domains, cultural practice generates coherence without denying fracture. Rousseau et al. (1997: 1115) demonstrate that the “culture of origin radically modulates” how trauma is experienced post-migration. Expressive practice functions as a mechanism of re-symbolization rather than erasure.

Second, expressive practice operates as relational infrastructure. Belonging is not solely internal sentiment but a social relation requiring enactment and recognition. Rehearsals, performances, exhibitions, and workshops structure co-presence and reciprocity, enabling displaced individuals to appear as competent actors rather than humanitarian abstractions (Goodkind 2006). Such initiatives are most effective when they foster “active citizenship” (Vlachou 2017: 8), recognizing refugees as an “integral part of our societies” (Vlachou 2017: 7). As Elaine McGregor and Nora Ragab (2016: 11, 23) show, cultural organizations facilitate inclusion by shifting attention toward refugees’ competencies and contributions. Inclusion in this sense is negotiated rather than assimilative. Expressive spaces function as environments of co-learning (Krasner 1999), grounded in “refugees’ expertise on their own lives” (Goodkind 2006: 91), and can contribute to restoring confidence and self-reliance (Ugurel Kamışlı 2022: 87-88).

Third, expressive practice is embedded in institutional and moral economies. It is neither automatically emancipatory nor free from power asymmetries. Participation is shaped by funding regimes, cultural policies, and representational expectations. As Fassin (2011: 4) argues, “a critique of compassion is necessary... because it always presupposes a relation of inequality.” Expressive initiatives may challenge this asymmetry by foregrounding competence and authorship, yet they may also reproduce it if reduced to spectacles of suffering. Cultural value is produced within normative systems rather than existing outside them. In Geertz’s (1973: 204) terms, it is within lived social practice that the “imperfections of society” are negotiated.

The ICH framework offers a normative horizon that foregrounds dynamism rather than preservation-as-freezing (UNESCO 2003; Lenzerini 2011). Safeguarding heritage in displacement is not about conserving relics of a lost past but sustaining the living link between communities and future possibility. Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that expressive practice is neither romantic refuge nor merely policy instrument. It is a structured yet dynamic arena through which displaced persons reconstitute meaning, enact relational belonging, and negotiate institutional recognition. Culture in displacement does not simply survive; it reshapes the conditions under which belonging becomes possible.

Conclusion: Mobility as Circulation of Meaning

From a socio-cultural perspective, the Ukrainian refugee situation demonstrates with particular clarity that forced displacement entails more than geographic relocation. Alongside bodies travel repertoires of performance, embodied techniques, narrative forms, and symbolic resources. Theatre, music, dance, and visual arts reconfigure themselves within new policy and funding frameworks, generating relational spaces in which displaced persons negotiate identity, memory, and belonging. Expressive practice is therefore best understood as a mobile form of belonging: it produces continuity through recreation and sociality through participation.

Colson (2003: 4) reminds us that forced mobility involves learning to live with “the uncertainties, the loss of trust, and the indignities” of uprooting. Under such conditions, expressive practice is not ornamental. When lived experience is translated into artistic form, it becomes shareable and durable, functioning as what Geertz (1973: 30) calls a “consultable record” that stabilizes meaning amid instability.

As Rousseau and Drapeau (1998: 469) observe, the “construction of this coherence... is based both on what is said and left unsaid,” underscoring that continuity in displacement is forged through symbolic mediation. Expressive practices do not simply recount loss; they structure it, enabling displaced persons to weave fragments of past and present into meaningful form. In this light, displaced creators must be understood not as passive bearers of trauma but as active interpreters of their historical condition. As Catalani (2021: 184) notes, such artists act as “visual interpreters” who “mediate, re-organize and preserve memories,” resisting reductive narratives and asserting “unique histories and distinctive cultural identities” (Elie 2014, cited in Catalani 2021: 186). Artistic practice thus becomes both documentation and claim to narrative authority.

Belonging in displacement is neither linear nor territorially fixed. Lashchuk (2018: 703) characterizes it as “rhizomatic,” while Salazar (2010: 55) reminds us that imagination can sustain a sense of place across distance. Within this condition, creative practice becomes a mode of reinvention, a “process of transformation” (Braidotti, cited in Lashchuk 2018: 701). As Versluys and Lilley (2024: 5) observe, culture is simultaneously global and locally crystallized as identity. Displacement renders this paradox visible, as cultural forms circulate transnationally while anchoring belonging in concrete encounters.

Expressive practices also operate within political and institutional structures. As Chatzipanagiotidou and Murphy (2021: 465) argue, artistic practice can transform “private grief into public memory,” functioning as an act of “archiving the present” (2021: 472) in which “artic-

ulating absence” (2021: 470) asserts historical continuity. Such interventions align with Martiniello and Mescoli’s (2024: 2) understanding of artistic creation as “alternative and creative political action” contributing to “shared citizenship.”

These dynamics confirm the central argument of this article: expressive practice operates simultaneously as symbolic reorganization, social infrastructure, and institutional negotiation. It reconstitutes meaning following the fragmentation of social worlds, enables recognition across difference, and confronts the moral economies framing refugee life. Culture does not merely accompany displacement; it shapes the forms through which displacement is lived and interpreted.

Recognizing expressive practices as mobile infrastructures of belonging allows us to move beyond both romanticization and instrumentalization. Culture is neither sentimental refuge nor merely a policy tool, but a dynamic site in which meaning circulates, identities are renegotiated, and social worlds are reassembled amid rupture. As Speiser et al. (2024: 94) remind us, “hope, imagination, and artmaking in the presence of others help people cope.” Through expressive practice, displaced communities do not simply endure mobility; they transform it into shared meaning, demonstrating that even under profound destabilization, cultural life continues to generate belonging across borders.

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