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ART AS A TOOL FOR ACHIEVING SOCIAL INCLUSION: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PRACTICES IN MIGRANT CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This paper examines how migrant artists employ autobiographical art to navigate displacement, negotiate their identities, and promote a sense of belonging in new cultural contexts. In migration settings, art extends beyond fairness, functioning as a site of memory, resilience, and activism that links personal experience with broader social narratives. Adapting a constructivist epistemology, the study combines in-depth interviews with practising artists, autoethnographic reflection, and analysis of creative works. This qualitative approach highlights both individual trajectories and shared challenges, positioning the voices of migrant artists at the centre of interpretation. Findings identify five key themes: Artistic Journeys, shaped by migration, education, and career transformation; Autobiographical Art as Identity, Healing, and Resistance, where art becomes a tool for recovery and advocacy; Heritage and Cultural Continuity, which sustains traditions across transnational spaces; Social Challenges and Structural Barriers, including discrimination and institutional inequities; and Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Social Responsibility, reflecting artists' commitments to dialogue, community-building, and social change. The analysis

draws on Bhabha's Third Space Theory to illuminate hybrid identities, Narrative Identity Theory to emphasise storytelling and resilience, and Critical Race and Intersectionality Theory to examine structural inequities. Levitt's notion of Social Change through Art further demonstrates how creative practices catalyse dialogue and collective empowerment. By situating migrant artists' autobiographical works within these theoretical frameworks, the study demonstrates that art serves not only as a means of survival and identity construction but also as a powerful tool for promoting social awareness and inclusion. It argues that creative practices play a critical role in fostering intercultural exchange and generating transformative change within multicultural societies.

Keywords:

Migrant Artists, Identity and Belonging, Cultural Continuity, Narrative Identity, Cross-Cultural Collaboration

Introduction

Migrants and displaced people often face significant disruptions as they rebuild their lives in unfamiliar cultural settings. Throughout these experiences, autobiographical art emerges as an essential medium through which individuals express memory, negotiate their identity, document trauma, and affirm their sense of belonging. For immigrant artists, creative practice is not just a form of self-expression but also a social process through which new relationships, solidarities, and modes of engagement develop. Autobiographical art becomes a tool for inclusion: it fosters dialogue between communities, uncovers silenced histories, and challenges dominant narratives that categorise migrants solely in political or economic terms.

This paper examines how immigrant artists use autobiographical forms such as visual art, music, performance, storytelling, theatre, and multimodal expression to respond to displacement and connect with new social and cultural environments. The study is based on two linked research projects: first, a qualitative investigation of five immigrant artists working across different creative fields; and second, an earlier study of a detained, displaced artist whose autobiographical art became a compelling intervention in public debates about human rights and social justice. Although the contexts differ, one within community settlement, the other from detention, both highlight how autobiographical practice fosters resilience, creates space for dialogue, and promotes social inclusion.

Both projects are rooted in constructivist epistemology, emphasising how knowledge is formed through lived experience, storytelling, and relational interpretation. Together, they show that migrant autobiographical art is a powerful form of cultural participation and civic engagement. Rather than focusing on national identities or specific biographical markers, this paper centres on the shared experiences of immigrant and displaced artists, whose work offers broader insights into migration, belonging, and social change.

Literature Review

Autobiographical art has long been seen as a valuable way to explore personal experience, especially in contexts marked by displacement, identity change, and social upheaval. Scholars argue that artistic forms, whether visual, auditory, performative, or written, enable people to express complex emotional and cultural realities that often resist simple explanation (Kaimal,

2019). In migration research, autobiographical artistic practices provide insights into emotional histories, disrupted timelines, and shifting senses of belonging.

Migration, Identity and Cultural Belonging

The migration literature emphasises the fluidity of identity formation among individuals who navigate multiple cultural worlds. Vertovec (2001) highlights how transnational experiences create “multilayered identities,” while Fortier (2000) explores the labour of belonging as migrants build attachments to new social environments. Narrative Identity Theory similarly emphasises the importance of storytelling in shaping coherent selves during periods of transition. For immigrant artists, autobiographical art becomes a tangible form of narrative identity, an archive of lived memories and a medium for self-definition.

Bhabha’s (1994) Third Space Theory provides a valuable conceptual framework for understanding the hybrid identities that develop through artistic practice. In the “in-between,” migrants navigate cultural meanings, draw on inherited traditions, and create new forms of cultural expression. Art becomes the space where hybridity is enacted and reimagined.

Autobiographical Art, Trauma, and Healing

Artistic expression plays a significant role in processing trauma and fostering resilience among individuals who have experienced political violence, discrimination, or forced displacement. Research demonstrates that autobiographical creativity enables meaning-making, emotional regulation, and psychological recovery (Kaimal, 2019). For displaced or detained individuals, art can serve as a lifeline, an act of resistance, a mode of self-preservation, and a means of reclaiming personhood.

In the earlier project examining the work of a detained displaced artist, autobiographical art expressed the structural violence of confinement, exposed human rights abuses, and mobilised public empathy. This work reinforced Levitt’s (2021) argument that art can catalyse social change by connecting personal experience to collective understanding.

Art as Social Inclusion and Public Pedagogy

Artistic practice fosters intercultural dialogue and contributes to more inclusive social environments. Scholars such as Phillips (1994) and Levitt (2021) argue that art serves as a form

of public pedagogy, inviting audiences to engage in ethical reflection rather than offering fixed propositions. Through symbolic metaphors, installations, storytelling, and performance, artists create participatory spaces in which viewers encounter alternative perspectives, challenge assumptions, and recognise shared humanity.

Autobiographical art by immigrant artists holds a particularly important place in multicultural societies. It challenges stereotypes, disputes deficit narratives, and fosters a deeper understanding of migrant experiences. Whether through performance, music, visual art, or writing, immigrant artists promote cultural exchange and build community resilience.

Literature Gap

Despite the wealth of scholarship on migration and identity, there is limited research specifically exploring autobiographical art as a means of social inclusion for immigrant artists in contemporary settlement settings. Studies often view migrant creativity as cultural preservation or artistic expression, without delving deeply into the autobiographical aspects of practice or the social challenges that influence it.

Furthermore, research rarely integrates autobiographical art with McAdams and McLean's narrative identity theory and with Crenshaw's intersectionality to examine how structural barriers influence creative expression. Second, there is a lack of comparative work linking immigrant community artists with displaced or detained artists, despite their shared experiences of marginalisation and resilience. Thirdly, there are a few studies that adopt a constructivist, qualitative, and autoethnographic approach that centres artists' own interpretations of their creative trajectories, along with an autoethnographic perspective that reflects the researcher's point of view.

This study addresses these gaps by analysing autobiographical practices across two interconnected contexts: community-based immigrant artists and a displaced artist working from confinement. It reveals how creative expression supports both personal and collective forms of belonging.

Contribution of the Study

This paper offers three major contributions:

Conceptual Contribution

It presents autobiographical art as a form of relational knowledge that illuminates the lived realities of migration, belonging, and displacement. By integrating Third Space Theory, Narrative Identity, and intersectionality, the study demonstrates how creative practices foster hybrid identities and challenge existing structural inequalities.

Empirical Contribution

It presents original qualitative research with immigrant artists whose autobiographical practices express resilience, cultural continuity, and community engagement. It also extends analysis from the earlier displaced-artist project, showing how autobiographical work produced under conditions of confinement contributes to broader social advocacy.

Social Contribution

It argues that autobiographical art is a powerful tool for social inclusion: it fosters empathy, creates intercultural connections, prompts ethical reflection, and promotes civic participation within diverse societies.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, constructivist epistemology, based on the belief that meaning develops through lived experience and interpretive dialogue. It draws on multiple data sources, including Semi-structured interviews with immigrant artists across visual, musical, and interdisciplinary practices. Autoethnographic reflection, including the researcher's involvement in artistic production and community-based cultural events. Thematic analysis of autobiographical art created by a displaced artist in detention and in the new society. Analysis of creative outputs such as musical compositions, short stories, installations, performances, and digital works.

A thematic coding approach was employed to identify patterns across the datasets. The hybrid method enabled cross-contextual interpretation while preserving each participant's voice.

By anonymising all individuals and removing national identifiers, the study emphasises shared migration experiences rather than demographic details.

Findings

Theme 1: Artistic Journeys: Migration, Education and Transformation

Immigrant artists described intricate artistic journeys shaped by migration, disrupted careers, and the necessity to reconstruct creative identities within unfamiliar cultural landscapes. Many had established artistic or professional pathways before migrating. Relocation required them to navigate new institutional systems, language barriers, and shifting expectations. Some returned to formal education to retrain or validate their work in the new setting, while others expanded their interdisciplinary skills to adapt.

The disruption of migration often sparked artistic transformation. Participants explained that their creative focus shifted post-resettlement toward autobiographical expression, cultural storytelling, and community involvement. Artistic practice became a way to reconstruct identity, process displacement, and reclaim agency within a society that mostly marginalised migrant voices.

The detained displaced artists' trajectories differed in setting but shared notable similarities: separation, uncertainty, and confinement influenced their creative work. Autobiographical writing, poetry, and illustration became a form of psychological survival and political testimony. Despite significant restrictions, the artist cultivated an internationally recognised creative voice, showing how displacement can spark profound artistic growth even under strict conditions.

Theme 2: Autobiographical Art as Identity, Healing and Resistance

Participants consistently framed autobiographical art as an essential tool for identity negotiation, recovery, and socio-political resistance. Through their creative practices, immigrant artists revisited memories of home, processed trauma, and expressed the emotional complexities of belonging. Art offered a safe space to confront experiences of loss, separation, and discrimination.

Autobiographical art also functioned as resistance. Several artists described how their work challenged stereotypes about migrants, confronted exclusionary narratives, and asserted their

right to self-definition. Artistic expression was a way to reclaim authorship over their own stories in contexts where migrants are often spoken about rather than listened to.

For the displaced artist, resistance was built directly into the creative process. Art revealed the injustices of detention, recorded violations, and humanised the experiences of those confined. The autobiographical narrative, produced under surveillance and with limited resources, became a strong critique of state violence and a call for public mobilisation. This reflects participants' experiences in settlement settings: although not detained, they also used art to challenge marginalisation and advocate for visibility.

Theme 3: Heritage and Cultural Continuity Across Borders

The maintenance of cultural heritage emerged as a key focus. Participants described using symbolic motifs, traditional artistic techniques, musical forms, and narrative structures rooted in their cultural roots. These practices allowed them to maintain a sense of continuity across geographical and temporal distances.

For migrant artists, cultural expression is not static but develops within the new environment. Many blended traditional elements with contemporary or cross-cultural techniques, creating hybrid forms reflective of their Third Space identity. This hybridity, neither entirely rooted in the homeland nor solely in the host society, shows how migrants creatively navigate cultural meaning.

Similarly, the detained artist used cultural references to resist erasure and uphold dignity in dehumanising conditions. The preservation of cultural memory through writing and illustration became a form of self-protection and collective remembrance. Across both contexts, heritage emerges as an anchor that sustains identity during displacement and fosters connection to both past and future.

Theme 4: Social Challenges and Structural Barriers

Immigrant artists often described experiences of discrimination, institutional bias, and limited access to professional networks. They encountered barriers in employment, recognition, funding, and integration within artistic communities. Intersectional factors, including gender, migration status, language skills, and professional background, shaped the degree and type of exclusion they encountered.

Despite having extensive skills, many participants felt undervalued or misrecognised. Some reported being seen as “ethnic artists” rather than as professionals, while others struggled with the instability of freelance creative work. These structural barriers led to emotional strain, fewer opportunities, and constant negotiations of legitimacy.

The earlier project demonstrates how structural violence manifests intensely within detention systems. The displaced artist faced complete exclusion, culturally, politically, and physically. Their art reveals how institutional environments exacerbate inequality and suppression. By linking both contexts, the study shows how exclusion occurs along a spectrum: from subtle everyday discrimination to overt systemic violence in detention.

Theme 5: Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Social Responsibility

Both immigrant and displaced artists viewed creative practice as a form of social responsibility. Participants emphasised the value of cultural exchange and its importance, community involvement, and collaborative artistic production. Many of them worked across diverse cultural settings, teaching, performing, organising community events, and collaborating with artists from different backgrounds.

Autobiographical art served as a bridge for intercultural dialogue. Through workshops, performances, exhibitions, and digital storytelling, artists invited audiences to connect with migrant experiences empathetically. Their work helped challenge stereotypes, foster understanding, and create inclusive community spaces.

The displaced artist’s collaborations with journalists, filmmakers, and advocacy networks extended this sense of social responsibility into global public discourse. By sharing autobiographical art under restrictive conditions, they contributed to international debates on human rights, influencing public opinion and policy awareness.

Across both datasets, a shared theme emerges autobiographical art isn’t an isolated act but a relational practice connecting individuals, communities, and social movements.

Discussion

The findings strengthen the central argument that autobiographical art plays a critical role in migrant social inclusion. By drawing on Bhabha’s Third Space, the analysis illustrates how immigrant artists inhabit hybrid cultural locations and express this hybridity through creative form.

Their work challenges binary understandings of identity and instead reveals complex, changing cultural negotiations.

Narrative Identity Theory further explains how autobiographical art enables migrants to reconstruct coherent life stories following episodes of rupture. Through creative expression, participants engage in ongoing meaning-making, integrating memories of home with experiences of settlement. Their narratives challenge marginalisation and assert their agency.

Intersectionality provides insight into how structural inequalities influence artistic practice. Immigrant artists face layered barriers based on migration status, language, gender, and racialisation. Autobiographical art becomes a way to respond to these inequalities, either subtly, through nuanced storytelling or directly, through clear social commentary. For displaced artists, this resistance is heightened, as their creative work serves as a tool for survival and political advocacy.

Finally, Levitt's framework highlights how autobiographical art creates social change. Whether in community arts contexts or through international collaborations, creative works drive dialogue, empathy, and civic involvement. They contribute to wider debates on human rights, social justice, and cultural inclusion.

Conclusion

This paper argues that autobiographical art is a crucial tool for immigrant and displaced artists as they navigate the complexities of migration and belonging. Drawing on qualitative data from two related research settings, the study shows that creative practice is both personally and politically rooted in memory, influenced by structural inequalities, and aimed at social connection.

Autobiographical art allows migrants to express their histories, confront misrepresentations, safeguard cultural heritage, and actively participate in their communities. It serves as a means for healing, shaping identity, and empowering collectively. Within wider theoretical contexts, the findings demonstrate the transformative power of art in multicultural societies: it builds empathy, cultivates shared understanding, and encourages audiences to engage more ethically.

At a time when migration remains a key global issue, raising the voices of immigrant and displaced artists is crucial. Their autobiographical work not only enriches cultural scenes but

also promotes social inclusion and human rights. Creative expression becomes more than just art; it turns into dialogue, resistance, and hope.

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