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ABSTRACT

Transnational humanitarianism is a deeply meaningful form of labour, defined by moral purity and sensorial intensity. However, the systems of meaning that underpin humanitarian work are frequently challenged by the dissonances of an industry beset by ethico-political contradictions. Recent changes, such as the increasingly corporate modus operandi of humanitarian agencies and moves to decolonize aid, reinforce a sense of existential uncertainty among humanitarians. By combining qualitative research into the lives of aidworkers with theoretical insights from existentialism, this article investigates how practitioners navigate the absurdities of humanitarian praxis in the third decade of the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Since the turn of the century, it has been common for practitioners and scholars to declare that the humanitarian field is enveloped in some variety of internal crisis (Gourevitch 2010; Kennedy 2019; Rieff 2003). Writing over a decade ago, Barnett and Weiss (2011, 1–3) argued that 'humanitarians have careened from pillar to post, from one emergency to another, from euphoria to depression', resulting in 'an anxious collective identity crisis'. This article examines how these anxieties manifest at the level of individual practitioners. Transnational humanitarians are beset by a series of structural challenges that threaten to undermine systems of meaning. Recent changes, such as hyper-professionalization, diversification, the increasingly corporate modus operandi of humanitarian agencies, and moves to decolonize aid have exacerbated existential anxieties in the sector. Aidworkers experience multiple threats to the sense of moral righteousness that their profession depends on to recruit and motivate employees. Individuals are attracted to humanitarianism because it is seen as a distinctly meaningful and existential form of labour, defined by moral purity, post-materiality, and sensorial intensity. However, the systems of meaning that underpin humanitarian labour are increasingly under strain because of the dissonances of a profession plagued by political constraints, normative ambiguities, and widespread feelings of inefficacy. The clash between humanitarianism's appeal to higher meaning and the failure to satisfy that appeal gives rise to a sense of

absurdity; defined by the dissonance between humanity's yearning for meaning and the tendency for meanings to fragment (Camus [1955] 1991).

By homing in on how 'intervention encounters' shape practitioners' knowledge and understanding of their vocation, this research follows in the footsteps of sociological investigations into the lives of professionals working in spaces of intervention (Autesserre 2014; Daho, Duclos, and Jouhanneau 2019; Goetze 2016; Smirl 2012). The article also speaks to ethnographic research documenting how humanitarians face the everyday paradoxes of Aidland (Malkki 2015; Mosse 2005; Philipsen 2021; Redfield 2005; Roth 2015). Yet, it differs from previous bottom-up analyses of interventionary practice thanks to the emphasis placed on processes of meaning-making and meaning-loss. Past studies have (implicitly) alluded to the centrality of meaning as a motivator of humanitarian action (Donini 2010, 231; Houldey 2022; Roth 2015, 58–59). However, this distinctly existential theme has lacked explicit theorization within critical sociologies or ethnographies of aid practice. This blindside is rectified by focusing on the feelings of existential absurdity which accompany challenges to practitioners' systems of meaning. To better conceptualize these experiences, I borrow from existentialist psychology, as well as Camus' ([1955] 1991) absurdist philosophy. By conceptualizing humanitarianism in these terms, the article introduces a novel way for thinking about how practitioners might navigate the inequities and dilemmas of a changing profession.

Empirically, I draw upon semi-structured interviews with twenty-five transnational humanitarians. As transnational professionals, these are individuals who cross borders to engage in emergency relief work. They include a mix of people working for United Nations (UN) agencies, including UNICEF and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and Oxfam. Interviews were carried out between July and September 2023. Participants were asked about their motivations for pursuing aidwork, how they found meaning in their vocation, and whether this meaning was ever challenged. The sample of participants was largely made up of white Europeans and North Americans, reflecting the research's focus on individuals working for large (Western-based) humanitarian organizations. Only three were born in non-Western countries; each of whom was educated in the Global North. Sixteen were female humanitarians and nine were male. Participants occupied varying levels of seniority, ranging from junior interns to managers and seasoned retirees. Participants also occupied a range of professional roles, from operations, logistics, and medicine to fundraising and research. The majority had worked in a variety of roles. Likewise, most had been employed by more than one humanitarian organization over the course of their careers.

I focus on expatriate humanitarians rather than those employed locally or nationally by aid organizations because they most embody what Audra Mitchell (2014, 1) calls a 'Western secular cosmology'. This cosmology has a particular understanding of violence and the value of human life which is historically rooted in a Western Judeo-Christian tradition. It is a worldview that encourages lofty (and ultimately unachievable) interventions to 're-enchant humanity, to reverse the effects of violence, and to affirm the exceptional value of human life' (3). This cosmological tradition is not exclusive to transnational humanitarians, but it is most acutely concentrated amongst them given that most of them are socialized within a Western-liberal milieu. This became clear through the interviews, where transnational humanitarians distinguished their immaterial, ethical and

aesthetic motivations from the allegedly more instrumental motivations of national or local staff.[1] This ideological investment makes transnational humanitarians particularly exposed to feelings of absurdity when universalist ideals clash with the messy realities of everyday aidwork.[2]

I use the term 'Aidland' to refer to the professional spaces which these individuals inhabit (Apthorpe 2011). This is a useful term to the extent that it grasps the 'internal interconnected-ness and yet external detachedness of these spaces from wider political and academic debates' (Heathershaw 2016). I adopt a broad and heterogenous definition of Aidland which encompasses both those working in field locations in the Global South, as well as those who work remotely to support aid interventions from headquarters in the Global North; principally Geneva and New York. Most participants had experience working in both locations: twenty-one had been on field missions, while twenty had worked at headquarters. The interviews probed for key motivations driving involvement in humanitarian labour, as well as exploring personal challenges to participants' professional identities. Building on ethnographic and sociological literature, this research deploys an everyday methodology, investigating how meanings manifest in (and are confronted by) practitioners' phenomenal realities (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010, 1122). It highlights the individual impacts of structural dynamics in the humanitarian sector. While some participants remained steadfastly committed to their vocation, a sense of moral and existential dissonance was a recurrent theme throughout the interviews. These dissonances were mediated by intersectional identities, with younger, female, and non-white participants being the most negatively affected by the sector's (gendered and racialized) modus operandi.

The article proceeds as follows: in the first section, I outline the main concepts and theories which frame the rest of the article, with particular reference to existentialist psychology and absurdist philosophy. The second section then traces humanitarian practitioners' quests to immerse themselves in an idealistic, sensorially exciting, and ethically distinctive vocation. The third section proceeds to investigate common sources of alienation, including the need to work in stressful and traumatogenic environments where a widespread sense of inefficacy prevails. In recent years, these issues have been compounded by growing financial precarity, hyper-professionalization, corporatization, and localization initiatives which threaten humanitarian jobs in the Global North. Following this, the fourth section outlines how feelings of absurdity arise when practitioners' systems of meaning are threatened by the moral dissonances of contemporary aidwork. I place particular emphasis on the spread of decolonial praxis in challenging the ethical foundations of liberal humanitarianism. The final segment considers how practitioners navigate absurdity, and questions whether a business-as-usual approach is sustainable given the sector's more problematic, particularly corporate and neo-colonial, features. The article concludes by arguing that humanitarians cannot escape the absurd conditions of contemporary aid, but nevertheless they should 'rebel', in the manner of Camus's ([1953] 2000, 1), by challenging the sector's inegalitarian structures and practices.

Meaning and absurdity: A conceptual framework

The capacity to create and find meaning is a fundamental aspect of the human condition. Meaning supplies coherence to the way we act and think in the world. As the existential

psychologist Viktor Frankl (1992, 105) once argued, homo sapiens are driven by an under-lying 'will to meaning'. Meaning is a pre-condition for a minimal sense of ontological secur-ity; it helps keep existential anxieties at bay (Giddens 1991). Meanings provide cognitive stability in a world that is chaotic and fragmented. Meaning in this sense is both epistemic and affective: it involves (inter-)subjective constructions of knowledge about reality, as well as emotive feelings which lend sensorial depth to those perceptions. Within the psychology of meaning-making, meanings are seen to range from basic mental codifications and attri-butions about objects in the world to more elaborate systems of meaning. Roy Baumeister uses the analogy of the spider web (1991, 20): systems of meaning are constituted by net-works of schematic associations and distinctions. More salient meanings are those woven by webs of densely connected schema. A sense of purpose or belonging, experienced affec-tively by individuals, is associated with these more tightly bound webs of meaning. Aside from purposiveness, Baumeister (32) identifies three other 'needs for meaning': a sense that one's actions are normatively justified, a sense of agency or efficacy, and a sense of self-worth where individuals feel that their lives have value. As a salient system of meaning in liberal-secular societies, transnational humanitarianism taps into each of these four sources of meaning. While meanings are experienced by individuals, they also have a rela-tional dimension. As Baumeister argues, 'meaning […] is fundamentally social' (9). It crystal-lizes through interaction and co-recognition.

However, densely weaved systems of meaning do not always stand the test of time. The strains of human existence can weaken webs of meaning. Sometimes meaning-loss can occur suddenly. For instance, in his work on ontological insecurity, Giddens (1991, 202) highlights the role of 'fateful moments', such as shocking or traumatic events, where life's routines are disturbed and individuals are forced to rethink aspects of their existence. The loss of meaning can also come about more slowly, through an accumu-lation of stress, weariness, or gradual disillusionment. This is reflected in the cliché of the mid-life transition, where individuals experience feelings of disenchantment after rea-lizing that achieving life goals does not lead to enhanced satisfaction (Baumeister 1991, 71). This is a common pattern among mid-career aid workers (Houldey 2022, 9). Disen-chantment can also arise through a process of 'hysteresis' (Bourdieu 1990, 59), where structural changes create a disjuncture between a subject and the norms of the environ-ment that they inhabit. When entering a professional space, individuals have certain expectations about the rules and logics that govern that space. However, over time, the logics that govern a professional space can change, leading to feelings of discomfort among those who were socialized according to prior expectations. As I will explore later, this process of hysteresis has particular relevance for the humanitarian sector, which has undergone significant structural changes in recent years.

The conditions under which meaning-loss occur are highly contingent and will differ from individual to individual. Interviewees reported that intersectional factors like gender, race, and sexuality can create acute stressors for certain humanitarians. Yet, no humanitarian is immune to the possibility of meaning-loss. How meaning-loss is experi-enced affectively is also contingent. The fragmentation of systems of meaning can be a painful experience, bringing about a sense of existential anxiety and ontological insecur-ity (Giddens 1984, 62). The loss of meaning is also associated with other negative emotional states: depression, pessimism, apathy and sometimes frustration or anger (Baumeister 1991, 49). According to Baumeister, the psychological effects of meaning-loss

tend to be less severe for individuals who succeed in cultivating multiple systems of meaning which furnish their different needs for purpose, normative investment, agency, and social affirmation (46–47). Conversely, those who rely on a single source of meaning are more likely to experience existential anxiety in the wake of meaning-loss. As I will discuss in section three, this is a particular dilemma for humanitarian practitioners because of the engrossing and dislocating nature of overseas aidwork.

The tension between the innate striving for meaning versus the tendency for meanings to fragment can be conceptualized through the existentialist notion of the 'absurd'. The human quest for meaning in a world seemingly devoid of purpose is a key theme which unites authors from across the existentialist tradition (Heidegger [1953] 2010; Kierkegaard [1941] 2013; Sartre [1946] 2007). While notions of absurdity can be found across the existentialist canon, absurdism is most closely associated with the writings of Albert Camus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* ([1955] 1991) and *The Rebel* ([1953] 2000), Camus explored absurdity as a general tenet of human existence. He also sought to define ways that individuals can confront life's absurdity. Camus's absurdism is based on two core premises: a subjective tenet, and an objective one. The subjective premise is that humans have an innate need for meaning, or what he calls a 'nostalgia for unity'; a fundamental human longing for a sense of unity, coherence, or wholeness in life (Camus [1955] 1991, 50). This assertion chimes with existentialist psychologists like Roy Baumeister (1991) and Viktor Frankl (1992, 105); the latter of whom established a school of psychotherapy on the assumption that humankind is motivated by an underlying 'will to meaning'. Camus' second premise is that there is no objective meaning to be found in the universe. Existence is ultimately meaningless, fragmented, and beyond reason. Fused together, these two premises constitute the absurd condition: no matter how much Sisyphus invests his energies in pushing the boulder to the summit, he is eternally condemned to see his rock fall to the bottom of the hill (Camus [1955] 1991, 120). This absurdism neatly captures the existential and moral dissonances of the contemporary humanitarian profession.

Camus did not simply define life's absurdity in empirical terms, as a fact of human existence, but he also sought to engage with it normatively. Camus identified several ways that individuals might respond to the absurd condition. One common reaction is denial or escape, where individuals turn to religion or ideological dogma to impose artificial meaning upon an indifferent universe. This 'philosophical suicide' is the act of abandoning reason and seeking refuge in illusions that mask the absurdity of existence (Camus [1955] 1991, 28). Another response is despair, characterized by resignation to meaninglessness or nihilism, where individuals cease to search for meaning altogether. In contrast, Camus ([1953] 2000, 1) advocated 'rebellion' against the absurd, a paradoxical approach which involves both recognizing the fragility of life's meaning while also reaffirming one's own existence in the face of this absurd condition. This perspective requires a balance between acceptance of the absurd and the pursuit of personal integrity and authenticity. The *Myth of Sisyphus* ([1955] 1991) serves as metaphor for this approach: Sisyphus was condemned to an eternal struggle, yet his perseverance in the face of futility embodied the rebellious spirit that Camus advocated. Building on this Camusian perspective, this article concludes through a call for aidworkers to rebel against the absurdity of their profession by challenging the field's structural inequities whilst also remaining cognisant of the fact that the absurdities of Aidland cannot be entirely dispelled.

Finding meaning in humanitarianism

The rest of this article follows the conceptual structure outlined in the previous section, starting with how humanitarianism satisfies yearnings for higher meaning. It is important to note that the meanings derived from transnational humanitarianism differ considerably from everyday meanings. Unlike material forms of labour which are geared towards producing tangible commodities, humanitarian practice constitutes moral labour which, according to Feldman (2007, 700), involves a process by which individuals produce themselves as ethical subjects. Mitchell (2014) argues that this humanitarian impulse is undergirded by a Western secular ontology which, in lieu of God, emphasizes humanity's responsibility to defend human life. This is not to deny that humanitarian labour can have more instrumental benefits; working for a UN agency can be financially lucrative. Yet, when humanitarians were asked why they pursued careers in aid, they frequently cited the allocentric nature of their work, rather than selfish motivations. The socio-political legitimacy of transnational humanitarian actors is partly tied to this normative appeal to selflessness (Kennedy 2019, 211). According to Barnett and Stein (2012, 25), the humanitarian field depends on the immersive sense that its enactors are doing sacred and exceptional work. Within this formulation, humanitarianism sets itself apart from the materialism and instrumentalism of the everyday, where '[t]he everyday is consumed by politics and power, while the sacred is concerned with saving lives' (25). Here, the post-material heroism of humanitarianism is juxtaposed with the profanity of *homo economicus* and egoistic social practices associated with consumerist society. These distinctions add density to the webs of meaning which underpin motivations for humanitarian action, enabling aidworkers to accept personal sacrifices in pursuit of an often-traumatic vocation.

Meanings arising from a sense of agency were a common theme when I interviewed humanitarian professionals. The notion that labouring in Aidland felt impactful was a common trope.[3] This sentiment was expressed most vividly by field-based practitioners, where bearing witness to suffering and beholding the tangible outcomes of aid were sources of professional pride. The emotional feedback acquired from interacting with the beneficiaries of humanitarian aid is particularly rewarding.[4] This reflects Baumeister's (1991, 41) emphasis on efficacy as a core condition for meaning-making: webs of meaning crystallize into more solid mental structures when individuals feel that they are enacting their normative commitments in a competent manner which is recognized by others. The transnational dimension of working for a UN agency or an INGO adds further layers of meaning. Field-based aid missions provide privileged individuals from the Global North with opportunities for adventure and sensorial excitement. Interviewees contrasted the sensorial excitement of Aidland with the ennui of homeland.[5] Getting lost in humanitarian labour allows practitioners to feel 'vitally alive' (Malkki 2015, 43). The social and personal intensity of aidwork adds extra layers of meaning. Individuals can develop meaningful connections to domestic populations, while they often develop a strong sense of collegial solidarity in more 'bunkerized' or isolated contexts (Autesserre 2014, 165).[6]

The engrossing nature of aid interventions can mean that personal identities become consumed by the humanitarian profession. Field-based aidworkers often find it difficult to find friendship networks or pursue hobbies outside of the humanitarian bubble.[7] One participant likened returning home from field missions to landing on another planet.[8]

Another described leaving the field as a psychedelic, dream-like experience.[9] It is precisely this disconnect from other lifeworlds which underpins Apthorpe's (2011) definition of Aidland. The systems of meaning that are cultivated in Aidland can irrevocably shape practitioners' dispositions and perceptive faculties; a testament to the intense liminal sociality (and affective connections) that aidwork engenders (Smirl 2012). Overall, humanitarian practice can satisfy Baumeister's 'needs for meaning' (1991, 32): particularly through normative investment, a sense of purpose and efficacy, and the social affirmation of one's labour. Overlapping webs of meaning underpin the pursuit of humanitarian labour; webs of meaning that crystallize to form a strong sense of vocational identity. The density of these webs of meaning enables humanitarians to withstand stressful working conditions. It helps them deal with job insecurity, long working hours, exposure to trauma, and life in isolated compounds. However, when individuals struggle to cultivate alternative systems of meaning because of the demanding nature of their profession, they potentially become more vulnerable to the negative effects of meaning-loss when vocational meaning systems are eroded (46–47). The proceeding sections explore what happens when those meanings begin to unravel.

Sources of alienation in Aidland

Despite the attractiveness of humanitarianism as a distinctively exciting, heroic, and ethical mode of practice, all is not well in Aidland. As Malkki (2015, 53–54) argues, '[w]hile even difficult aid missions may be personally very rewarding as a challenge met, they are often also experienced as psychically troubling, leaving feelings of guilt and regret in their wake'. In humanitarian spaces, persistent problems include high staff turnover (Roth 2015, 102), disproportionate levels of anxiety, depression, alcohol abuse (Connorton et al. 2012, 147), the prevalence of a burnout culture, as well as a dearth of pastoral care within NGOs or UN agencies (Houldey 2022). These issues have been compounded by changes within the humanitarian field in recent years: hyper-professionalization, stifling bureaucratization, precarity and job insecurity, discontent over the implementation of localization and diversification policies, and the spread of a self-reflexive, decolonial critique. These stresses are not felt equally by everyone, but fall most acutely on the shoulders of junior, non-masculine, and non-white staff. In this section, I discuss these compounding stressors. This will set the stage for the next section, which will provide more of a theoretical discussion of the absurd condition of humanitarian praxis.

Humanitarian aid missions have long been recognized as stressful environments. According to Smirl (2012), living in a foreign interventionary context is akin to inhabiting a liminal bubble between the host country and the intervenor's home society. Dwelling in these liminal spaces for too long can have negative impacts on the mental health of aidworkers. Interviewees reported feelings of isolation, anxiety and guilt due to estrangement from homelife, and yearnings for a more stable family life.[10] A workaholic culture of self-sacrifice also pervades many humanitarian organizations, leading to high levels of stress and burnout (Asgary and Lawrence 2014, 5). Interviewees noted how stress transforms the way that people behave in the field, sometimes resulting in toxic working environments and the mistreatment of colleagues.[11] When practitioners come to recognize their own behaviour as altered, or even morally problematic, such a conscious

reflection can trigger existential anxiety, where individuals question their sense of purpose and belonging.[12] High levels of stress and associated mental or physical health complications are compounded by the risky nature of much humanitarian work. The physical dangers posed by working in areas of armed conflict can lead to circulations of affect; anxieties are transmitted between aidworkers.[13] Multiple interviewees in this study were forced to leave field missions, in some cases permanently, due to traumatic exposure, pathological anxiety, and exhaustion associated with burnout.[14]

These stresses can be particularly acute for individuals who do not fit the mould of what Houldey (2022) calls the 'perfect humanitarian': the highly gendered and racialized ideal of the humanitarian saviour. A 'cowboy culture' is prevalent in field-based contexts (Ozcan, Hoelterhoff, and Wylie 2021, 6; Roth 2015, 142), with masculine social codes embedded in the organizational cultures of many humanitarian INGOs. Female and non-heteronormative humanitarians find it difficult to pass in these gendered spaces (Read 2018, 311). Although interviewees noted that aspects of aidwork have become increasingly feminized in recent years, particularly at headquarters, the persistently macho culture of humanitarianism was identified as a source of alienation.[15] Female participants complained about sexual harassment at both organizational headquarters and field missions.[16] This chimes with growing awareness about the extent of sexual misconduct perpetrated by aidworkers, thanks to the #AidToo movement and public revelations of sexual exploitation at organizations like Oxfam (Houldey 2022, 64; The New Humanitarian 2021). Given that the *raison d'etre* of humanitarian organizations is to safeguard vulnerable populations, such revelations threaten to alienate humanitarians from their own profession. Intersectionality is important here too. Non-white women can be particularly disadvantaged within interventionary spaces. One former UNHCR employee of East Asian descent noted the dissonance created by her social standing as a non-white woman operating in the field: she was told by colleagues that she needed to adopt masculine social codes when interacting with local partners, something which conflicted with her dispositional hexis.[17]

Feelings of helplessness are also rife in Aidland. The realization that one's moral labour is insignificant can be disenchanting, especially against the backdrop of entrenched inequalities, cycles of violence, political interference, and bureaucratic constraints. A sense of inefficacy is particularly pronounced for practitioners who have little contact with the populations that they are supposed to be aiding, especially for those living in high security compounds, where physical distancing from host societies is the norm (Autesserre 2014, 250).[18] Feelings of inefficacy can also stem from a gap between self-perceived (in)competence and the complexity of humanitarian work. Early career humanitarians are often thrown into lead operational or managerial roles, where their decisions can have life-or-death consequences (Roth 2015, 84). This reliance on inexperienced workers is a testament to the limited labour supply in high-risk contexts, as well as high staff turnover, and the transient nature of many humanitarian projects. Colonial mentalities which epistemically privilege the expertise of Northern (usually white) intervenors over that of local populations exacerbates this phenomenon. In these contexts, imposter syndrome becomes a source of doubt and critical self-reflection.[19] For instance, one Italian humanitarian doctor outlined the harrowing self-doubt that accompanied the realization that they lacked the necessary clinical expertise when treating dying patients.[20] As Dunn (2012) argues, aid interventions are often defined more by 'adhocracy' than competent

governance. Indeed, one humanitarian emergency manager noted the sleeplessness and anxiety stemming from a constant demand to 'feign omniscience', referring to the need to maintain an inauthentic façade of control and hubris to hide the inherent disorder and uncertainty of complex emergencies.[21]

Discontent is also widespread among humanitarians who work outside of the field, in various northern metropolitan spaces. Here, we find a sense of inefficacy, as well as frustrations at being distanced from the fruits of moral labour.[22] While a culture of volunteerism persists in some field-based spaces, the headquarters of humanitarian organizations function according to more professionalized and bureaucratic social codes.[23] By imposing instrumental rationality on aidwork, professionalization can be seen as a way of coping with anxiety (Hor 2022). Yet, in contexts that are remote from the field, the banality of aid technocracy threatens to hollow out the idealism which attracts people to the humanitarian profession (Fechter and Hindman 2011, 6; Houldey 2022, 69). For those working at UN agencies, excessive red tape, budgetary constraints, slow communications, and political interference beget feelings of helplessness and a loss of agency.[24] Some interviewees were particularly disturbed by the 'NGOization' of aid (Choudry and Kapoor 2013), wherein the normative ethos of humanitarianism appears increasingly subordinated to a corporate culture of competition, public relations, and organizational growth.[25]

Across the humanitarian sector, job precarity also threatens the ontological security of humanitarian practitioners. In the field, the fleeting timespan of humanitarian missions, the prevalence of short-term contracts, the lack of organizational support structures, and the constant need to seek out new job opportunities are all significant sources of stress and anxiety. Such precarity is particularly acute for junior humanitarians on short-term contracts, although sector-wide financial issues since the Covid-19 pandemic have heightened job insecurity across the board.[26] Most humanitarian organizations are headquartered in expensive Western cities like New York and Geneva, where social security for foreign workers can be limited. When aspiring humanitarians find themselves out of work, the cost of living is often prohibitive.[27] I interviewed one individual who, after being denied welfare payments, was forced into sex work as a way of making a living between contracts in Geneva.[28] Even with some degree of diversification in recent years (in terms of the geographical and ethnic backgrounds of humanitarians), these casualized labour dynamics ensure that transnational aidwork is largely limited to the world's privileged upper-middle classes; those who can afford to sustain themselves through the unpaid internships and (often multiple) postgraduate degrees from Western universities which are usually necessary to enter the profession (Roth 2015, 49).

These anxieties have been compounded by recent changes in the practice and discourse of humanitarian action. 'Localization' has become a popular buzzword across the humanitarian and development sectors (Mansuri and Rao 2013). This rhetoric appeals to the need to 'empower' local partners and devolve employment opportunities to sites of intervention. These appeals chime with decolonial discourse. Critical academic scholarship has long raised the idea that humanitarianism is inextricable from Western imperialism (Donini 2010; Redfield 2005). In recent years, this critique has increasingly informed practitioners' perspectives of their own vocation. Since 2020, with the global proliferation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, anti-colonial critique has energized debates around how humanitarian praxis might reckon with the field's complicity in (neo-)colonial dynamics and racial hierarchies (James 2022, 479; Pallister-Wilkins 2021).

Some participants see localization and decolonization initiatives as undermining cherished liberal-universalist values.[29] Others accept the idea that humanitarianism perpetuates colonial dynamics.[30] Participants born in non-Western countries were particularly critical of the sector's entrenched racism and (neo-)colonial power relations.[31] This reflexive self-critique, along with the national and ethnic diversification of the humanitarian workforce, threatens to destabilize the systems of meaning that undergird humanitarianism. The ontological, epistemological and ethico-political foundations of aidwork, established on the hallowed ground of Western liberal-universalism, have been unsettled by a growing discourse of pluriversalism (Azarmandi 2024). Therefore, not only do aidworkers have to persevere in high-stress and traumatogenic environments, and come to terms with their limited agency in the face of various structural and organizational constraints, but now they also have to reckon with challenges to the very existential-normative core of their vocation. As I will argue in the next section, these pressures feed into a growing sense of absurdity among humanitarian practitioners.

When Aidland becomes absurdland

In the second section, we explored how humanitarianism appeals to individuals seeking a distinctly meaningful vocation, contrasting with the banality and amorality of everyday existence in post-industrial society. This coheres with the subjective dimension of Camus' absurdism: the nostalgia for a meaningful life. In their striving for immaterial value, this nostalgia finds particularly salient expression among transnational humanitarians. The last section documented the multiple stressors which threaten to fragment the systems of meaning that underpin humanitarian practice. This coheres with the second (objective) dimension of Camusian absurdism: meaning is fragile and easily frustrated by the strains of human existence. Taken together, the contradiction between humanitarians' inherent will for meaning, and the failure of their labour to satisfy this urge, constitutes an absurd condition; a condition which manifests in existential anxiety among humanitarian practitioners. The notion that humanitarianism reflects absurdist themes is not an entirely novel suggestion. Everett and Friesen (2010) conceptualized humanitarian accountability through the prism of Samuel Beckett's *Théâtre de l'Absurde*: humanitarians must performatively negotiate the contradiction between Dunantist principles of neutrality and their dependence on donor governments. By presenting humanitarians as engaged in an absurdist performance, these authors seek to 'desecrate, desacralize, and radically undo the silence that characterizes […] humanitarian work' (479). We can go a step further by acknowledging that the unspoken absurdity of humanitarianism is not just engendered by the political demands of donors, but by a broader set of existential dissonances which typify contemporary praxis.

Feelings of absurdity are particularly acute among transnational aidworkers precisely because of the vocation's appeal to allocentrism. Ethically speaking, humanitarians have further to fall when idealism fails to synergize with everyday practice. The intense and engrossing character of aidwork, and the way in which it tends to consume the identity of its adherents, means that professional humanitarians are generally more exposed to the negative effects of meaning-loss. Absurd contradictions are found throughout Aidland: between rhetoric and reality; between humanitarians' pursuit of moral labour and a realization of the prevalence of amoral or egoistic practices; between a desire to

positively impact the lives of beneficiaries and the structural constraints which render these efforts futile; between a desire to develop meaningful connections with diverse societies and an awareness of the distanced and abstractive nature of aid interventions; and between a sense of moral righteousness versus an emerging decolonial discourses which challenges the paternalistic logic of aidwork. For the remainder of this section, I am going to explore these existential dissonances in more detail, referencing both Camusian absurdism and empirical insights gleaned from my own fieldwork with humanitarian practitioners, with a particular emphasis on the impact of decolonial praxis.

Absurdity in moral dissonance

Classic humanitarianism is distinctive because of its appeal to being a 'sacred' mode of practice, focused on saving lives, separate from logics of power or profit (Barnett and Stein 2012, 25). My interviews suggest that this ideal is still a dominant motivation for pursuing this vocation, even if it means accepting significant personal sacrifices. Nearly all the participants in this study suggested that they were idealistic when they first entered the profession. However, most participants struggled to maintain this idealism in the long-term. The dissonance between the purity of the humanitarian ideal and the impurity of day-to-day practice invites feelings of cynicism and absurdity (Christian 2023). As Malkki (2015, 53) asserts, 'aid workers are sometimes left feeling ambivalent, inadequate, and even impure about the work that they have done, despite their best efforts to fulfill the standards of their profession and their personal ethical commitments'. The sense that the humanitarian ideal has been corrupted was a strong theme among interviewees. The tension between ideal and practice is particularly stark for those working at organizations which have a strong self-mythology, like the ICRC or MSF.[32] These organizations have cultivated a narrative of ethical exceptionalism which helps them recruit, secure funds, and gain legitimacy in the eyes of governments or warring parties. Yet, the heroic image of the ICRC delegate or the *sans frontières* doctor, nourished by the prevalence of white saviour tropes in Western popular culture, is rarely matched by everyday life in the profession.

Among participants, the most common source of moral dissonance stemmed from perceptions that political or egoistic logics were diluting attachments to immaterial labour, as well as challenging Dunantist ideals of neutrality and non-partisanship. This is not a novel suggestion. The idea that humanitarian principles have been eroded by political imperatives was captured in scholarship on the 'new humanitarianism' of the 1990s and early 2000s (Barnett 2005; Chandler 2001; Fox 2001). Despite proclamations that humanitarianism has been irrevocably changed by political interference, humanitarian organizations still profess values of independence and impartiality, and Dunantist principles remain resonant among practitioners.[33] Yet, there is an unresolved tension between a desire for neutrality and the fact that aid organizations are necessarily dependent on negotiation with (and the consent of) political actors (Christian 2023; Redfield 2005; Rubenstein 2015). Aidwork demands choices that are inescapably political: choosing between national or local partners; choosing where and to whom to distribute aid; grudgingly accepting constraints from donors; and choosing when to make public statements that might implicate aid organizations in the construction of political narratives about crisis situations. Interviewees frequently complained about the need to politically compromise. One participant working on a project related to European migration was

censored by their patron due to the political sensitivities of European governments.[34] Another interviewee scoffed at the absurdity of having to feign political neutrality when working for the UN, while at the same time noting that UN agencies were deeply invested in the governance of countries-in-crisis.[35]

The perception that the aid industry has been overtaken by logics of greed can also give rise to feelings of absurdity. On a structural level, aid organizations exist in a competitive industry. INGOs and UN agencies struggle for legitimacy and financial sustenance. Interviewees complained that humanitarian organizations are increasingly driven by self-serving corporate cultures which emphasize growth, the prioritization of aid according to donor preferences, and a competition for funds which leads to a lack of coordination between agencies.[36] A corporate modus operandi encourages ethically questionable practices which grate against the normative commitments of humanitarian practitioners (Christian 2023). For example, one practitioner working in East Africa alleged that the UN and INGOs were 'complicit in the provision of false numbers in order to ensure the flow of humanitarian assistance to keep and maintain [refugee] camps'.[37] The dominance of these corporate logics contradicts the volunteerist spirit which attracts people to the profession. As one humanitarian medical practitioner asserted:

> If I had to label the crisis [of humanitarianism], I would say that it's clashing values. I don't see my values as being the primary motor behind the machine. The humanitarian field is becoming more and more of a corporate sector. They're using more and more of the corporate terminology. They are more and more looking to expand their yearly budget.[38]

For others, it was less a clash between one's personal beliefs and the dehumanizing amorality of the humanitarian sector, and more about clashes in values between groups of practitioners. As Hindman (2011, 176–177) outlines, marketization has increased the number of high-paid sub-contractors working in the field; many of whom are ex-military personnel who are less motivated by the ethical dimension of aidwork. Likewise, some participants expressed frustration that colleagues hired from national contexts were less driven by altruistic imperatives and more motivated by financial reward.[39] Such frustrations were caveated with a recognition that the relatively lucrative salaries of aidworkers, compared to average incomes in most places affected by crises and violent conflict, made diverging motivations inevitable. Immaterial labour is often a privilege afforded to many of the world's more wealthy populations. While some interviewees revelled in the diversity of the humanitarian workforce, normative pluralism was also cited as a source of moral dissonance. While transnational humanitarianism has traditionally been dominated by white middle-class expatriates, it is no longer such a culturally homogenous space. Some practitioners find it difficult having to reconcile liberal-universalistic commitments with conservative social codes in certain interventionary contexts.[40] One former practitioner described the difficulty of mediating between universal and pluriversal conceptions of human dignity in Sierra Leone:

> Female genital mutilation was very commonly practiced in the community where we were living in Sierra Leone. Among the people we were living with, there was a young girl who was soon reaching her teens, and she wanted to go through the 'initiation process', as they call it. For me personally it was very troubling because, on the one hand, this is a human rights violation. That's what I have read and it's what these organizations are

working on. But on the other end, who am I as an outsider to comment on what's correct or not for their community? Those dilemmas were very hard to reconcile.[41]

As Camus argued in *The Myth of Sisyphus* ([1955] 1991, 13), '[t]his divorce between man [*sic*] and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of Absurdity'. Humanitarians want to believe that their labour is purposeful. A bourgeois curiosity for cultural otherness means that many transnational practitioners have a genuine desire to make meaningful connections with the host populations that they interact with. However, the structural imperatives of a multi-billion dollar aid industry, as well as the normative strains of a pluriversal workforce, often frustrate these yearnings. Bunkerization and the growth of aid bureaucracies, which encourage more distanced and alienated forms of humanitarian labour, also threaten to undo ethical bonds between practitioners and the recipients of aid. Here, there is a sense of hysteresis: a dislocation between ethico-political subjectivity and the social rules of the environment in which subjects are embedded (Bourdieu 1990, 59). In recent years, this dissonance, giving rise to feelings of absurdity, has been affected by structural and discursive changes in Aidland. Two of these changes have been detailed already: the corporatization of aidwork and declining cultural homogeneity. However, a third change – decolonization – is worth exploring in more detail because, if taken seriously, it fundamentally challenges the existential basis of the liberal-humanitarian enterprise.

Reflexivity and decolonization

As Philipsen (2021) suggests, intervenors in spaces of conflict and crisis are usually cognisant of the ethical quandaries that their everyday practice engenders. While self-awareness regarding practitioners' enmeshment in colonial power relations is not ubiquitous, it has grown over time. In the wake of BLM, a heightened level of self-critical reflexivity has brought about existential reckonings for many transnational humanitarians. As the literature on humanitarian liminality highlights (Autesserre 2014; Smirl 2012), physical and social barriers separate privileged intervenors from the contexts of poverty and crisis in which they operate. Aid interventions, usually financed and led by Western-based actors, are interpreted as a continuation of a historic *mission civilisatrice* (James 2022; Verma 2011). As Azarmandi (2024, 2) argues, 'race, capitalism and colonial encounter continue to shape much of the conflict zones across the world today'. For Bian (2022), the humanitarian field is still a highly racialized workplace where the expertise of white professionals is privileged over that of local (non-white) colleagues. According to Madianou (2019), digital innovation and novel data practices have further entrenched colonial relationships of dependency within contexts of intervention.

My own research shows that practitioners are often conscious of these inequities.[42] When asked, interviewees were split on whether they accepted the accusation that humanitarianism is a (neo-)colonial activity. Some respondents appealed to the necessity of humanitarian missions, particularly in the context of acute emergencies where, in the view of some practitioners, the raw facticity of human suffering renders discourses of decolonization 'irrelevant' or 'overly abstract'.[43] Others reasserted the value of universalist ethics in conceptualizing the delivery of humanitarian aid; as opposed to the pluriversality encouraged by decolonial critique.[44] A friction exists between the universalist ethics professed by many transnational aid practitioners and the growth of locality and

particularism as emergent imperatives within the sector. This reflects a process of hysteresis, where practitioners wedded to universalist assumptions feel left behind by a changing profession.

Yet, despite some resistance, most respondents were self-critical, and some were candid in their support for decolonizing aid.[45] The persistence of (neo-)colonial power relations (between intervenors and intervened) was clearly a source of anxiety. Some felt a lack of belonging in host countries, believing instead that they were intruding into societies of which they had little knowledge or connection.[46] Others professed guilt stemming from the privilege afforded to expatriate humanitarians, especially when compared with the deprivations of surrounding populations.[47] Practitioners from the Global South conveyed particular trepidation at occupying an intermediary position: not feeling as though they belong to the Western-led archipelago of aid, while also feeling a liminal disconnect from targeted populations.[48] While the profession has undergone ethnic diversification in the past two decades, implicit racial hierarchies persist in the field, with senior positions dominated by Westerners.[49] At leading INGOs, there is a particularly stark inequality, in terms of social authority and financial reward, between expatriate staff and national colleagues; something which was also source of guilt among practitioners.[50] The sense that the profession perpetuates a caste system rings discordant against the universalist and anti-racist aspirations of most humanitarians.

Decolonization is usually subsumed under broader initiatives to localize aid by devolving authority closer to host societies. This includes shifting the locus of aidwork to the Global South, as with Oxfam's decision to move its international headquarters to Nairobi (Bianyima 2016). Whether this constitutes a decolonial move is debatable. Western states and non-state foundations still gatekeep many of the purse strings which determine aid flows. Nevertheless, the movement towards employing more people from the Global South does present somewhat of an existential crisis for practitioners from the Global North.[51] Transnational humanitarians who have spent decades cultivating systems of meaning around their vocation are facing the prospect of unemployment, particularly in contexts of financial precarity. If expatriate humanitarians from the Global North accept the need for localization and decolonization, and follow these demands to their logical conclusion, then they potentially undermine the basis of their own career aspirations. They lose purpose in a field which prioritizes the devolution of responsibility to the Global South. It should be acknowledged that decolonial and localization initiatives are a positive development in terms of elevating the agency of populations subject to humanitarian interventions. Local and national staff also stand to benefit from these changes. Nevertheless, it is important to document the existential dilemma that these developments pose to transnational humanitarians. By challenging the normative foundations of Dunantist universalism, decolonialization threatens to undo the webs of meaning that undergird the Western-liberal model of humanitarianism, inviting a sense of absurdity.

Responding to absurdity

For Camus ([1955] 1991, 50), absurdity is 'that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints'. The aid industry frequently disappoints by betraying the ideals of its adherents. Interviews with practitioners show that this disappointment is a

source of anxiety for many humanitarians. But, aside from feelings of existential uncertainty, how do humanitarians deal with the absurd contradictions that they so frequently find themselves in? In this final section before the conclusion, I overview the ways that humanitarians respond to the existential dilemmas highlighted above. A diverse set of responses can be observed. To nullify the moral dissonances of humanitarian practice, individuals frequently look to reframe their praxis, thus ensuring continuity in their sense of investment in their chosen vocation. Others develop cynical views of their profession; a means of negating the ethical significance of the industry's more problematic aspects. At the individual level, the defence or adaptation of meaning frameworks becomes a means of maintaining ontological security, keeping existential anxieties at bay (Giddens 1991). Yet, to what extent do these protective manoeuvres address the root causes of alienation? Is it sustainable for practitioners to adopt a business-as-usual approach, wherein the structural inequities of the aid sector remain unchallenged?

For humanitarians, a common response to meaning-loss is to find employment at a different organization, or to relocate to a new field mission (Roth 2015, 150). In doing so, individuals can move on from past stresses by treating them as 'lessons learned'. Humanitarians are therefore able to counter the dissonances of aidwork by transmuting bad experiences into practices which feel more constructive or purposeful. Another means to reframe past experiences is to temporarily leave the profession to pursue academic study.[52] Two interviewees moved from humanitarian practice into education and advising roles, finding meaning in helping others navigate the tribulations of Aidland.[53] I also interviewed a former aidworker who, after being forced to leave the profession due to psychological trauma, established a programme of pastoral support for fellow humanitarians.[54] These types of career changes, whether it is using past negative experiences as lessons learned or simply helping others, involve the alteration and reframing of vocational meanings so as to make sense of the more disenchanting aspects of aidwork. This strategy tempers feelings of absurdity and enables individuals to maintain a sense of existential and affective investment in the humanitarian profession, despite its hardships.

Another way to escape absurdity is to leave the profession entirely. Among those most disillusioned with humanitarian praxis were individuals who went on to pursue careers in alternative fields like development, human rights, or political advocacy. For one participant, development work felt more impactful and meaningful because of its extended temporality, as compared with the transience of short-term humanitarian assistance.[55] For others, human rights and advocacy work felt less ethically compromising than humanitarianism.[56] In these cases, participants still yearned for a more ethically pure form of labour. However, relocating to other sectors is easier said than done. An acutely tragic form of absurdity can be found among those who conclude that the profession is irredeemable, but then find that their highly specialized skillset makes it difficult to leave. As part of this research, I spoke to individuals who left roles at aid organizations because of the kinds of moral dissonance that I mentioned in the last section. In the wake of such dissonances, some interviewees decided to only apply for jobs which met certain red lines; a way of maintaining a sense of moral integrity.[57] Yet, such a resolve constrains employment opportunities, and leads individuals into the difficult position of having to choose between ethical compromise and unemployment. A few interviewees felt stuck between moral imperatives and the need to fashion realistic careers.[58] Feelings of being trapped in Aidland are exacerbated by the increasingly credentialized and

professionalized nature of aidwork; patterns which make humanitarians' curriculum vitae less transferable to other sectors.[59] Hence, some individuals found themselves in a kind of limbo state, conscious of the absurdities of contemporary aidwork, but unable to leave.

Facing absurdity, another strategy is to temper idealism, adjust expectations, and commit oneself to a gradualist view of humanitarian action. The co-founder of MSF, Bernard Kouchner (1991, 314), has written about the virtues of pessimism in maintaining humanitarian commitments. Some interviewees echoed this sentiment, recognizing the need to be pragmatic, to understand one's limits, and to find meaning in small incremental changes.[60] One participant argued that shedding one's idealism was necessary to guard against trauma.[61] This pessimism chimes with the more conservative dimension of Camus's philosophy: accepting that one cannot escape absurdity, recognizing the limitations of human existence, and making peace with these limitations. This ethos is closer to what has been defined as the Wilsonian-pragmatist tradition, where 'humanitarians have to accept reality, occasionally hold their nose, and get on with the job, even if it means working in sync with, or under the protection of, the forces of globalisation and Empire' (Donini 2010, 233). Some participants were led to reject the normative exceptionalism of aidwork altogether, instead emphasizing the more egoistic aspects of the profession: prioritizing financial needs or finding meaning in the touristic aspects of the job.[62] Here, the absurd contradiction is avoided by removing the first aspect of the contradiction; the illusion of higher meaning is dispelled, negating moral dissonance. However, these attitudes discourage transformations in the political culture of humanitarianism. As Christian (2023, 31) argues, organizational cynicism 'poses the grave danger of paradoxically reinforcing and perpetuating the very problems and discrepancies … from which individual employees actually want to protect themselves'. While it might be easier to disavow the need for radical changes in the short-term, resolving to accept existing orthodoxies merely preserves the structural conditions which give rise to many of the ethical dissonances that are plaguing the inhabitants of Aidland. A cynical or pragmatic outlook might work for some, but not all. It is most suitable for more privileged humanitarians, especially senior aidworkers who can craft comfortable lives in Geneva, New York, or other (Western) metropolitan spaces. A business-as-usual approach is less tolerable for an increasingly diversified humanitarian labour-force, where intersectional positionalities create acute stressors for those disadvantaged by masculine cultures and implicit racial hierarchies.

Within the sector, there is growing self-awareness regarding the (neo-)colonial and racialized aspects of the profession. As a framework for (re)thinking and (re)doing humanitarianism, decoloniality has become a particular source of existential anxiety. As I argued in the previous section, decolonial logics threaten to liquify systems of meaning which have undergirded humanitarianism for over a century. Humanitarians sometimes combat such threats to the moral foundations of their praxis by seeking solace in narratives that emphasize the aid giver's ethical exceptionalism in contrast to imagined 'bad others' (Hor 2022, 368). According to Hor (379), these reductive coping mechanisms encourage half-measures, like visiting the field more often or hiring more national staff, without any meaningful turn towards local participation. While humanitarians usually disavow the colonial image of the white saviour, some participants in this study were still committed to the ethical primacy of universalism and liberal-Dunantist principles. However, Dunantist mythology largely ignores the problematic (colonial) social relations

built into most humanitarian missions. It casts only a thin veneer of moral legitimacy over an increasingly diversified, pluriversal and corporatized sector, where the inherent contradictions of classic humanitarianism are progressively rendered visible. Rhetoric of universality, impartiality and neutrality do not undo the underlying political economy and structural conditions which render this rhetoric absurd.

All of the above strategies, ranging from pessimism to liberal idealism, risk inertia within the sector; perpetuating a working environment which is conducive to existential anxiety. Following Camus ([1953] 2000), absurdity may be unavoidable, but there are still more (and less) desirable ways in which absurdity might be confronted. Inertia is arguably among the worst responses to the multifaceted crises of contemporary humanitarianism. But is there another path? How best should humanitarians navigate the absurdities of aid practice? An alternative can be found in the attitudes of some of the younger humanitarians involved in this study. Despite a palpable sense of weariness among the participants, a commitment to fighting back against the sector's inequities – including its more corporate and colonial dimensions – was visible. Some participants articulated desires to push governments and donors to become more accountable to target populations, to challenge anachronistic working cultures perpetuated by the 'old guard' of INGOs, and to implement a less paternalistic, more reciprocal, and less overtly colonial approach to humanitarian aid.[63] These perspectives come closest to Camus' ([1953] 2000, 1) call to 'rebel' against the absurd condition, to embrace one's autonomy and engage in a progressive project of meaning-making (despite the inherent fragility of meaning). While these more combative approaches do not dispel existential uncertainty, they display an authentic yearning for more egalitarian forms of humanitarian praxis. Indeed, I would argue that such a conscious reckoning with humanitarianism's dark side is both desirable and necessary, even if it demands facing some hard truths about the absurdities of Aidland.

Conclusion

Even though aid agencies and INGOs increasingly resemble profit-driven corporations, they still depend upon the perception that they are carrying out meaningful and ethically exceptional labour. Marketing campaigns, white saviour narratives in popular culture, and the spectre of 'celebrity humanitarianism' help to perpetuate the archetype of the humanitarian hero (Kapoor 2013, 12); an image that continues to attract young progressively minded recruits to the profession. Even for those less bewitched by lofty rhetoric, transnational aidwork offers a chance for travel, adventure, and sensorial excitement. Taken together, the ethical promise and the experiential intensity of aidwork, especially when compared with the vast majority of other human endeavours, makes this line of work particularly attractive for individuals yearning for a sense of purpose, efficacy, and stimulation. However, the webs of meaning which underpin this vocation are far more fragile than most young humanitarians expect. This fragility can lead to an absurd contradiction: between a desire for meaning and the tendency for this meaning to be shattered by the various strains and tensions of contemporary aid practice.

Aidland has always been a uniquely traumatogenic space. Practitioners frequently bear witness to extreme human suffering, while also navigating unforgiving working patterns, social separation, claustrophobic compounds, and circulations of stress and anxiety. While humanitarians have always been confronted by existential uncertainty regarding their

insecure profession, recent changes have rendered their vocation increasingly absurd. The resonance of liberal humanitarian ideology, giving rise to a sense of moral righteousness, traditionally acted as a protective shield against existential uncertainty. It is easier for practitioners to persevere through the stresses of aidwork when they have a clear sense of mission and efficacy. However, changes in the structure, practice and discourse of transnational humanitarianism have eroded the coherence of humanitarian ideals. The corporatization, securitization, and hyper-professionalization of aidwork increasingly abstracts workers from the fruits of their moral labour. More and more of the international labour force consists of specialized experts working in Western cities like New York and Geneva, leading to a greater separation from sites of intervention. Meanwhile, the imperatives of organizational growth and inter-agency competition threaten to hollow out humanitarianism's ethical appeal to allocentrism.

This article has also shown that humanitarians are increasingly conscious of their own complicity in paternalistic power relations. Growing awareness of the racialized and colonial lineages of aidwork, as well as knowledge of the limits and (in)efficacy of Northern-led interventions, have undermined the hegemony of the liberal-universalist logics which underpin classic humanitarianism. Transnational practitioners are on the frontlines of these dilemmas. They are subject to existential anxiety as the systems of meaning which anchor their everyday practices are rendered fragile. However, these anxieties are not confined to Aidland. They reflect broader disturbances within (a post-liberal) global politics. Humanitarianism is therefore a microcosm of the wider tension between an increasingly beleaguered liberal-universalism and growing intellectual and political demands for pluriversality; an ethos which demands an end to top-down, paternalistic interventions led by the Global North's metropoles of wealth and power (Azarmandi 2024).

Humanitarian practitioners strive to fashion sustainable careers amidst these controversies. This is a difficult ask, given the absurdities and moral dissonances documented in this article. However, the question should not be 'how might these existential uncertainties be avoided or repressed', but 'how might they be harnessed productively'? Transnational humanitarians will not be well positioned to deal with existential anxiety by simply perpetuating the hollow mythologies of classical liberal humanitarianism, or by disavowing the ethical contradictions of a field trapped between competing moral sensibilities and an unforgiving political economy. Neither is passive resignation a desirable response to such moral dissonance. Following the existentialist tradition, a sober and critical self-reflexivity is necessary to face the absurdities of contemporary humanitarian practice. This means swallowing some hard truths about the sector's structural inequities. Following Camus ([1953] 2000), humanitarians should rebel against the absurdities of the interventionary context, not by disavowing existential anxiety, but by embracing it as a productive force which enables constructive change within the humanitarian sector. Anxiety can therefore be harnessed as a generative spur to radical action (Berenskötter 2020), where individuals consciously commit themselves to a mode of action which is authentic to egalitarian ideals, while also recognizing the inherent fragility of the systems of meaning that undergird humanitarian practice. By navigating a changing field in this reflexive manner, aidworkers may not be able to escape absurdity, but they should find more fulfilment through striving to go beyond the self-serving corporate logics, political interests, and paternalistic colonial relationships which continue to plague humanitarian practice.

Notes

1. Interview 1, senior practitioner, Geneva, 7 August 2023; Interview 2, practitioner, online, 14 September 2023; Interview 3, emergency practitioner, online 28 September 2023.
2. This is not to downplay the stresses placed on national or local staff, who are often impacted negatively by the humanitarian sector's neo-colonial structures and racialized discourses (Bian 2022). Further studies are needed to investigate whether feelings of absurdity are prominent among non-expatriate humanitarians.
3. Interview 4, practitioner, online, 28 September 2023; Interview 5, research practitioner, United Kingdom, 28 September 2023.
4. Interview 6, ICRC staff, Geneva, 16 August 2023.
5. Interview 7, former practitioner, Geneva, 9 August 2023; Interview 2.
6. Interview 8, specialist in gender-based violence, online, 20 September 2023.
7. Interview 9, former practitioner, Geneva, 8 August 2023.
8. Interview 10, practitioner, online, 24 August 2023.
9. Interview 8.
10. Interview 11, former UNHCR practitioner, United Kingdom, 25 August 2023; Interview 12, practitioner, Geneva, 9 August 2023; Interview 9.
11. Interview 13, research practitioner, online 31 August 2023; Interview 4.
12. Interview 14, practitioner, Geneva, 16 August 2023; Interview 7.
13. Interview 15, junior practitioner, Geneva, 9 August 2023.
14. Interview 16, former practitioner, online, 24 August 2023; Interview 17, practitioner, online, 25 September 2023; Interview 18, former practitioner, online 26 September 2023; Interview 7.
15. Interview 19, junior practitioner, Geneva, 14 August 2023; Interview 6.
16. Interview 20, practitioner, Geneva, 10 August 2023; Interviews 15 and 19.
17. Interview 11.
18. Interview 9.
19. Interviews 4 and 8.
20. Interview 21, humanitarian medical practitioner, online 26 September 2023.
21. Interview 3.
22. Interviews 8 and 10.
23. Interview 2.
24. Interview 22, practitioner, online, 27 September 2023; Interviews 4 and 5.
25. Interview 23, junior practitioner, online, 22 August 2023; Interviews 12 and 21.
26. Interviews 14 and 19.
27. Interview 23.
28. Interview 20.
29. Interviews 3 and 10.
30. Interviews 4, 8, and 21.
31. Interviews 11, 15, and 17.
32. Interview 2.
33. Interviews 2, 3 and 6.
34. Interview 20.
35. Interview 5.
36. Interviews 12, 22, and 23.
37. Interview 17.
38. Interview 21.
39. Interviews 1, 3 and 22.
40. Interview 5.
41. Interview 15.
42. Interview 25, former practitioner, United Kingdom, 25 July 2023; Interviews 12 and 21.
43. Interviews 3, 6 and 7.
44. Interviews 3, 5 and 13.
45. Interviews 15, 16, and 17.

46. Interviews 7, 21 and 23.
47. Interviews 8 and 11.
48. Interviews 15 and 19.
49. Interview 21.
50. Interviews 4 and 17.
51. Interview 25.
52. Interviews 15, 16, 17, and 21.
53. Interviews 1 and 9.
54. Interview 18.
55. Interview 17.
56. Interviews 20 and 23.
57. Interview 14.
58. Interviews 4, 20, and 23.
59. Interview 3.
60. Interviews 12, 14, and 17.
61. Interview 10.
62. Interviews 9 and 12.
63. Interviews 2, 15, and 23.

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Ethical approval

Approval for this research was provided by the University of Sussex's Social Sciences & Arts Cross Schools Research Ethics Committee on the 1st June 2023 (Ref: ER/ASM39/2). Verbal consent was obtained from all participants.

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