

# Creative (en)counterspaces: Engineering valuable contact for young refugees via solidarity arts workshops in Thessaloniki, Greece

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## Abstract

This article explores the role of non-formal arts education in Thessaloniki, Greece for fostering contact considered valuable by the young refugee community. Drawing on accounts of their daily life, gathered over eight months of ethnographic field-work for a project on their post-15 educational participation, the article details how around the city, young refugees (aged 15–25 years) experience conflicted encounters involving both hostility and solidarity. While this hostility impacts their aspirations, self-image, and feelings of inclusion, a large solidarity movement attempts to counteract these challenges by offering educational activities for ‘inclusion’ such as arts workshops in temporary spaces. These offers were popular among youth in the study, as they constituted a welcoming opportunity for building social connections, language skills, and self-confidence—outcomes that extended beyond the physical space of the workshops. As such, they functioned as valuable, creative ‘(en)counterspaces’. Based on observations from one case study site, this article unpacks the key processes that promoted these valued outcomes—including collaboration, mediation, and informal contact—as well as the role played by arts materials and arts-making practices in these processes. This article also offers key considerations for designing similar activities, such as being sensitive to inclusivity and power relations. It aims to build on the literature on both ‘counterspaces’ and ‘encounters’ by documenting the outcomes young refugees value from contact in these sites of solidarity, and how and why they proactively seek them out; as well as analysing the other actors and specific activities involved in them.

**Keywords:** forced migration, youth, arts, encounters, counterspace, Greece

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## 1. Introduction

One winter's day in Thessaloniki, a young woman from Afghanistan—who had sought refuge in Greece alone—was curled up on the floor of a drama studio pretending to be an egg. She was not the only egg: a young British volunteer was similarly hunched over next to her, trying to make herself as ovate as possible. They gradually opened up, attempting a painstakingly accurate portrayal of the life course of a chicken, and cracked out of their imaginary shells. They breathed fresh air for the first time, eased their necks from side to side, slowly tried out their wings—and then caught one another's eye, and keeled over once again in fits of laughter. They looked up at their small audience, consisting mostly of fellow refugee<sup>1</sup> youth, non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff, and volunteers, who then joined them in laughing. It would be their turn next.

The youth had been attending this workshop for some weeks, in a city-centre basement studio lent to the organising NGO by a local cultural association. Many also participated in the NGO's other frequent arts programmes, held in other borrowed spaces around Thessaloniki, to promote—as the organisers stated—young refugees' inclusion in social life in the city (meaning, predominantly, gaining friendships and employability skills). Based on my observations and interviews with the youth and educational stakeholders involved in such workshops, and using the concept of 'creative (en)counterspace', this article contributes insights on the nature of young refugees' encounters in these 'safe' spaces of solidarity; the outcomes they valued; the key principles and processes which promoted these desired outcomes; and key considerations for designing and running similar arts-based, non-formal education<sup>2</sup> (NFE) initiatives for young refugees. I argue that these spaces can foster cross-cultural friendships, language skills, and self-confidence, in processes catalysed by arts materials and practices—thus providing young refugees with the tools they need to navigate some of the social challenges they face in their everyday lives. However, certain issues can persist, such as refugee–solidarian power imbalances and the homogenising of the refugee identity and experience. Furthermore, while such initiatives may create meaningful 'micro-publics' (Amin 2002) which hold value for refugee youth, they remain for the most part at the margins of society—with their bottom-up efforts inevitably limited by entrenched structural and social exclusion. As such, this article offers a much-needed discussion of the value and limitations of arts NFE as not only a safe and supportive counterspace for refugee youth, but also as a bridge into their new society. Before embarking on this analysis, however, I shall situate this research conceptually, empirically, and geographically.

### 1.1 Conceptual framework: Arts workshops as a creative (en)counterspace

This article brings migration studies into dialogue with youth, leisure, and critical race studies by drawing on the concepts of 'encounters' and 'counterspace'—and then weaving an arts thread through them.

First, the case study arts programme analysed below is framed here as a form of 'counterspace'. Counterspaces—a term stemming from critical race theory and applied in youth and leisure studies—are defined as safe and supportive community settings for

minoritised youth of similar backgrounds in which they can affirm their identities and challenge deficit-focused narratives (Case and Hunter 2012; Margherio et al. 2020). They may be physical school spaces where youth meet and socialise, study groups, student organisations, or study programmes for under-represented scholars (Muñoz and Maldonado 2012; Margherio et al. 2020; Sanchez Medina 2022). They are often created by youth themselves as same-race peer networks to mitigate the psychological, emotional, and physical stress caused by racism, and in which they support one another's success; in a positive resistance strategy which strengthens their aspirational, social, and navigational capital (Carter 2007; Margherio et al. 2020; Sanchez Medina 2022). While other concepts such as 'safe spaces' and 'sites of resistance' are similar, the Counterspace Framework encapsulates the specific functions of such settings for self-enhancement and self-protection, and thus for adaptive responding to marginalisation and the promotion of well-being (Case and Hunter 2012).

Application of the Counterspace Framework is very limited in refugee and migration studies, despite the fact that forms of oppression are relational and interlocked—such as how a migrant's undocumented status can compound the exclusion they face due to racialisation (Yosso et al. 2009). The research that exists, however, has found that in education, dedicated counterspaces can facilitate new skills and other learning outcomes, which may not be possible to achieve elsewhere—due to learners' immigration status—while also creating solidarity networks (Villegas and Aberman 2020). They can also function as spaces of 'epistemic possibility', in which migrants' non-mainstream identities and forms of belonging can become viable and exclusionary discourses can be reworked (Shirazi 2019: 480). Outside of learning settings, activities run by civil society can also function as counterspace for refugees, Bendixsen and Wyller (2019: 4) claim, by providing 'spaces of hospitality' which oppose restrictions, crisis discourse and populism. An example from the world of arts is the cultural festival: a counterspace that can validate refugees' experiences of rejection and marginalisation, celebrate their achievements, foster feelings of acceptance, permit expression in culturally meaningful ways, promote self-concept, and allow the building of social capital (via mentoring and volunteering schemes) (Hassanli, Walter and Friedmann 2020). They also offer marginalised groups the chance to move both psychologically and physically from the periphery to the centre: permitting them to safely engage in urban areas they might otherwise avoid, due to the likelihood of stigmatisation. As such, they fulfil a function as not only a counterspace or 'refuge', but also a safe site of possibility for interactions with 'dominant' groups (Hassanli, Walter and Friedmann 2020).

This article picks up on and develops this last point: on the potential of solidarity arts initiatives to function as a counterspace for young refugees, while also offering the chance for positive encounters with the wider community. As such, here I term them a 'creative (en)counterspace': i.e. a safe space at the margins which can provide support and identity affirmation for refugees, while also fostering interactions with the 'majority' public and potentially offering a bridge into 'mainstream' urban social life. As in Hassanli, Walter and Friedmann (2020), this counters the notion that counterspaces are inherently separatist settings, and suggests that they can also act as sites for cross-cultural contact leading to outcomes valued by refugees.

## 1.2 Engineering valuable contact via the arts

This takes us to the specific role of arts (programming) in fostering positive interactions between groups—and especially between migrant and ‘local’ youth.

This has been attempted via activities such as dance workshops, mask-making, and festivals, which have resulted in not only language skills and increased self-esteem, self-worth, and creativity among migrant participants, but also trans-ethnic and interfaith solidarities, trust, intercultural exchange, feelings of ‘togetherness’, and belonging and participation in society more broadly (Hickey-Moody 2017; Pace, 2017; Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto 2019; Wood and Homolja 2021). This is because, it is argued, artistic creation not only provides hospitable spaces for intercultural learning and amplifying marginalised communities’ voices and identities—opening up possibilities for solidarity (Harvey 2018; Harvey, Tordzro and Bradley 2022)—but, fundamentally, it enables the *materialisation* of young people’s identities in relation to their communities (Hickey-Moody and Harrison 2018). Beyond their benefits for the individual, these embodied and situated acts of making can then create new community sentiments towards young people and materially disrupt dominant discourses, via an ‘affective pedagogy’ that encourages mutual understanding and connects feelings to places and images (Hickey-Moody 2013, 2017).

With this said, cultural and creative practices have their limits in overcoming unequal power relations and ensuring long-term change amid anti-migrant discourse and policies (Jeffery et al. 2019). Moreover, it should be noted that encounters that are ‘engineered’ in this way may not lead to any behavioural or attitudinal transformation at all, or indeed the result may be negative (Wilson 2017)—as encounters can also generate anxiety, fear, and violence, and even exacerbate existing prejudices, boundaries, power differences, and conflicts (Valentine 2000; Amin 2002; Kraftl 2013; Listerborn 2015; Boersma 2020). Overall, the particular conditions and participants matter: contact and its potential for positive outcomes may be shaped by the historical, economic, and social processes at play in particular cities (Al Helali 2021); political and legal factors such as the results of participants’ asylum applications (Whyte 2017); young people’s motivation to attend and openness to meeting ‘Others’ (Mayblin, Valentine and Andersson 2016); and in general, the ‘situated social dynamic’ of the space (Amin 2002: 969).

With these issues taken into account, the question thus arises: which particular principles and processes, then, can promote successful interactions in creative ‘(en)counterspaces’ and lead to the outcomes refugee youth value? To explore this question, this article analyses one case study arts programme—which had the explicit intention of bringing young people from different backgrounds together, while acting as a form of ‘sanctuary’ for refugees—and whether and how any positive effects were achieved from this engineered contact, according to participants themselves. In doing so, it also aims to contribute to scholarship which centres young refugees’ agency, and the role of arts education, practices, and spaces in their navigation of precarity and belonging (e.g. Askins and Pain 2011; Pace 2017; Whyte 2017; Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto 2019). This particular case comes from an urban context which is under-represented in the international literature on refugeehood, encounters and counterspace, and which is coming to terms with its new forms of diversity.

### 1.3 Thessaloniki: A landscape of crisis and solidarity

As a key entry point into the European Union, Greek borders have become a particularly contested site over the last decade. The heightened numbers of refugees and other migrants arriving, peaking in 2015, resulted in what came to be described as a ‘crisis’—and more broadly, part of the ‘European refugee crisis’ (Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017). However, Greece is also still suffering from the impact of the financial crisis of 2008, which saw severe cuts to public sector funding and high levels of unemployment (Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos 2018). Therefore, before the COVID-19 pandemic brought a further crisis, the country’s hospitality towards refugees was already becoming strained. Now, according to statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), almost 170,000 refugees, asylum-seekers, and other ‘persons of concern’ are currently trapped in a country in which welfare provisions for displaced communities are slowly—and often quite discreetly—being dismantled (Mobile Info Team (MIT) 2021; UNHCR 2021; Smith 2022). Even after being granted asylum, recognised refugees risk losing financial and other support, and can still wait years before receiving travel documents (Andrea 2022). In addition, the political discourse has become increasingly anti-refugee, to the extent that the word ‘refugees’ is often replaced by ‘migrants’ or ‘economic migrants’ (e.g. Capital 2019), which erases the imperative of hospitality.

However, alongside this hostility, a substantial solidarity movement involving both Greek and international support has also mobilised in response to the ‘crisis’, which continues to fill state gaps by providing various forms of assistance to refugees today (Schmitz 2022). This is especially true in Thessaloniki—Greece’s ‘second city’—where since the beginning of the ‘crisis’, a number of (inter)national humanitarian organisations have gathered and established initiatives (Dicker 2017; International Organization for Migration (IOM) 2021). For the most part, this has been due to necessity: Thessaloniki constitutes the largest metropolitan area before the country’s northern borders, which were infamously and decisively closed in late 2015 and 2016 (Deardorff Miller 2017). This resulted in many refugees congregating in the city, having been placed in camps and apartments in and around it. Today, as a consequence, Thessaloniki is a site of varied and increased forms of cross-cultural contact: both among refugees themselves, and between refugees and the wider community. As such, it provides a relevant and somewhat under-researched field site for analysing such contact.

## 2. Methodology

This article draws on fieldwork conducted between October 2019 and June 2020 with young refugees and asylum-seekers (aged 15–25 years) and educational stakeholders in Thessaloniki. This involved semi-structured interviews with both groups in individual and pair formats. In total, a ‘core group’ of 12 young refugees were interviewed, along with 38 stakeholders such as teachers, parents, social workers, and educational programme coordinators. Alongside this, I engaged in participant observation as a volunteer educator and assistant for four NGOs in the city, given my professional background in teaching. This approach to being actively involved in arts workshops and joining youth in

activities offered the chance to build relationships and overcome communication issues (Jiménez Sedano 2019)—which is especially important for a volunteer coming from a different linguistic and migratory background. While including the voices of only 12 of the participants could have left the study at risk of bias, due to the issue of them eagerly ‘self-selecting’ to take part, the value of the programme was also evident in the fact that not only were the other participants consistently attending (across different programmes), but they also brought friends and relatives along who often ended up committing to the programme themselves. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, all interviews and teaching activities moved online, to platforms such as Zoom, Viber, and Skype. Ethical approval was granted by the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford.

The young participants were invited to take part via purposive and snowball sampling. Criteria included being 15–25 years of age; having arrived during or since the ‘peak’ of current flows in 2015; having applied for or received refugee status; and being a participant in at least one educational activity per week. The ‘core group’ who participated in interviews identified as Kurdish, Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, and Congolese (Kinshasa), with nine being young men and three young women. This reflects the fact that the observation sites were mostly attended by young men—which is why they are primarily quoted in this article. For stakeholders, criteria included having first-hand knowledge of young refugees’ education, from the classroom to the policy level. In this article, the focus is on one particular NGO—here named Hearts & Minds—and one key member of staff: the coordinator of their youth programmes, Alex. As someone who had been working with displaced youth in various settings in Greece for many years, Alex was able to provide valuable insight into not only their educational experiences in the case study workshops, but also how their lives outside the spaces impacted them. All names have been pseudonymised in this article.

Hearts & Minds’ work with youth is based on the principle that exclusion from education, employment and other activities in the local community leaves them at risk of isolation, with severely negative consequences for their mental health. Their conceptualisation of ‘inclusion’ is two-way (i.e. involving steps from both refugees and the ‘local’ community), and is tied up with empowerment: being based in youth’s own needs, as determined via needs assessments. These needs include being able to relax in safe spaces; get work experience and skills; process traumatic experiences via creative therapies; connect to their own and others’ cultures and identities; make communities; and share experiences. Hearts & Minds’ programmes thus aim to make links to the community and foster the development of skills and friendships, while offering a form of ‘sanctuary’ from their everyday, displacement-related difficulties. Arts and sports are considered a productive way of achieving this, as they promote collaboration around what are intended to be therapeutic activities. The observed programmes had 10–15 participants each week, and some youth participated more than once per week (e.g. in both painting and drama workshops).

Interviews were conducted in English, in line with participants’ preferences—having been given the option to invite an interpreter of their choosing. Information sheets and consent forms for youth were still, however, provided in a pictorial format. Interview transcripts were entered into NVivo and analysed according to the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006): being coded using an open coding technique

(based on participants' own words), followed by axial coding to identify the relationships between the open codes and to create categories which became themes. This was completed in an ongoing, iterative process until theoretical saturation was reached. This article focuses on young participants' responses regarding their everyday lives around the city, and their experiences in Hearts & Minds' arts workshops in particular.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1 Young refugees' everyday urban encounters in Thessaloniki

Young refugees in the study spoke of experiencing racism and discrimination in their everyday encounters with the public in Thessaloniki, while also finding support and assistance. Sayed, from Iran and in his early 20s, said that 'still now there is discrimination here. According the nationality, your colour, your religion.' Youth suggested that this is often connected to their identity as refugees, or assumptions are made that they are refugees, based on the languages they (do not) speak and the ways in which they are racialised. For example, Serkar, a young Kurdish man in his early 20s, said that

some people help me ... Like, I tell them something about my paper, I need something, it's help me. Yeah. Good people ... Other ones don't like refugee ... Because they tell me, 'you're coming to my country, you are bad, you are so bad.'

Augustin, a 16-year-old from the DRC, also said that he met 'haters' like this on the street: 'When, for example, I got out to go to school, maybe I found some guys said to me ... "Oh, you go to school? You think one day you will be somebody important in your life?" Yeah.' Hasan, 25, from Kurdistan, put these issues down to a lack of education:

They have a kind of racism here, about the different skin and, like, where did you come from. But really it's not all of them ... they have really, like, some very good people. They know equality, humanity. But I think these people they have educated—very good educated ... He know ... even you are black skin, you are white skin, or you are poor or wealthy, like European or Asian, you are a human.

However, young refugees could also experience hostility *within* the very heterogeneous refugee and migrant community. Other participants mentioned avoiding spaces such as certain language centres which they felt were 'for Syrians,' for example, and the tensions which arose in camps due to living in close proximity and challenging conditions. As well as this, it was reported by several interviewees that migrant populations who had arrived previously (such as Albanians, notably in the 1990s) and other minoritised communities (such as Roma) held grievances against newly arriving refugees, as they felt that they were being supported more generously by Greek and European authorities.

Beyond this gulf of misunderstanding, even when the youth did encounter Greeks and other city residents, the language barrier still prevented substantial interactions and the development of the friendships most of the participants desired. This could be due to either or both of the parties lacking skills or confidence in English, Greek, or any of the various other languages refugees knew. For example, Serkar still felt that his English level was holding him back, despite being able to hold a conversation. When asked if he had friends

from Greece or elsewhere, he replied, ‘no, I have just from my country before. In Greece I have a little bit friend. I don’t so much . . . because my English.’ Aside from preventing the development of relationships, this linguistic barrier also stopped refugees from being able to tell their stories and correct the misinformation which abounded.

All of these factors and experiences began to shape the young refugees’ self-image and self-efficacy, causing them to believe the negative stereotypes about themselves and limit their aspirations. As Augustin put it, ‘when you listen . . . it really affects your life.’ They contributed to their feelings of uncertainty, ‘permanent temporariness’ and ‘inbetweenness’—being caught between acceptance and exclusion, and between legality and illegality, in what Yiftachel (2009) calls the ‘gray space’. While this condition left many with feelings of disappointment, hopelessness, and apathy, it also became clear that this ‘gray space’ could be one of resistance—giving rise to new relationships and solidarity initiatives organised by both refugees and their allies.

### 3.2 Encountering solidarity in Hearts & Minds’ arts workshops

Despite these considerable social challenges and their impacts, refugee youth were quick to mention the ‘good ones’ who helped them: the people who were often considered more educated and more open to understanding refugees’ realities. Many of these people can be described as ‘solidarians’ (*αλληλεγγύη*). While in Greece, this term is used more for the grassroots activists and pro-refugee protestors who mobilised during the ‘peak’ of the crisis (Rozakou 2016), here—following Goździak and Main (2020)—I also subsume within it the staff and volunteers from NGOs who became involved in the response. It is all of these actors, and their solidarity initiatives, which have given rise to non-formal educational offers for refugees in Thessaloniki: ranging from homework clubs and language courses to arts and parenting workshops (Greece Education Sector Working Group (GESWG) 2018; Hunt 2021a). Youth in the study often sought out such initiatives, knowing that they were intended as welcoming, safe, and inclusive environments in which they could meet others of a similar age and acquire skills (see also Hunt 2021a,b). Building language competence was a key motivating factor for those who attended—and indeed it was the top priority for most, as they believed it would help them to gain employment. After this, youth noted that it was useful for meeting and making Greek friends.

One offer which was popular, and is thus analysed here as a case study, was the series of arts programmes run by the international NGO Hearts & Minds. Hearts & Minds’ programmes were mostly reliant on financial donations and volunteer support, and were run in ‘borrowed spaces’ around the city—such as dance studios, repurposed factories, and NGO offices—which were lent to them by cultural or humanitarian organisations. In terms of their purpose, like other NGOs around the city, they aimed to facilitate positive contact and meaningful communication between young refugees, their Greek peers, and other young migrants. However, each NGO also had its own ‘flavour’—or, indeed, its own funder-dictated remit. As Alex, for example, who coordinated Hearts & Minds’ youth programmes, explained:

We provide psychosocial support and skill development through the use of arts and sports, so until now we have run several projects around theatre, film



making, painting, photography, music, football, basketball ... It focus more on refugee populations, refugee and migrant population. At the same time, we try to engage locals as well ... to create learning environments for both local and refugee youth.

For Alex, building language skills was another important part of their programmes, as he felt it constituted the 'first step towards achieving your goals': 'It gives you access to a lot of things ... It goes with understanding of how things are operating, and how they are, in order for you to be a part of it.' These principles, and the ways in which they were put into practice, led to overwhelmingly positive outcomes for youth in the study—as described below.

### 3.3 Creative encounters: New connections, language skills, and confidence

As a result of their participation in Hearts & Minds' workshops, young people reported that they met their goals of building confidence and language skills; and, importantly, making friends with other young refugees, migrants, and Greeks and establishing relationships with facilitators and coordinators. In the workshops, they predominantly met other young people—some of whom were Greek, but most of whom were also from refugee backgrounds. In fact, many participants came together with one or more of their siblings or friends, meaning that the same faces could often be seen across workshops. As well as other youth, they also met staff and volunteers—who, during fieldwork, were mostly Greek, with the exception of those from across Europe and North America. They included students, artists, psychologists, cultural mediators, youth workers, dancers, and others, mostly volunteering their time to teach or assist with courses which typically lasted for a few months. Most of these 'solidarians' were below the age of 30 years, and often students or practitioners looking to gain experience in teaching and youth work. As such, young refugees encountered a relatively diverse mix of people, who may also have had their own experiences of racism, discrimination, displacement, or other commonalities.

Hearts & Minds' workshops were deemed particularly valuable, however, for offering the chance to develop relationships with Greeks. As Hamid, a young Kurdish man in his early 20s, explained:

Most important thing, they make us like, share with Greek people. That's good. Because the other organisations, just we were, for example, 20 refugees, one Greek. I didn't like. But in Hearts & Minds, we were [with] Greek people ... That's important, for Hearts & Minds especially—like people come near, close each other ... Because of Hearts & Minds, I have a lot of friend right now.

For Sayed, too, 'maybe the most important things' he had gained from his involvement in Hearts & Minds had been

coming to the society, coming to the experiences, coming to the arts ... because this is one of the way that you integrate in society. If you don't have too many friends, you will make friends, will take many experiences. I improved in this way, like my social skills ... I met so many good friends there, that are really good person, and they really help me. I took good advice from them.

Hasan had had a similar experience, saying that through Hearts & Minds, he had the opportunity to not only mix with Greeks but also to ‘meet with the volunteer from different countries’. As such, he had made

many friends, from many different nationalities. And sometime you are get outside, we talk about our culture, and her culture, or his culture. And we practise our language and we talking each other. Yeah. From Hearts & Minds we are very different—okay, we are immigration, and Greek people mixed.

Just as Hasan said that their conversations continued when they ‘get outside’, indeed, it seemed that the relationships they developed during the courses (with Greeks and others) extended beyond the physical spaces of the studios or NGO offices. They would follow one another on social media and share resources for learning in their group chat—such as YouTube videos and CV templates—and particularly when in-person workshops were suspended due to COVID-19. Therefore, the relationships which grew from these encounters could lead to other opportunities and forms of social support. As Hamid explained:

I have just one friend, her name is Eleni. Once, before one year, we joined a project *How to make a movie* ... So I met her there, she like me ... So we finished this project, and she’s told me once, that she’s doing another about education, about politic. Like, present speech to people. I was [there] once, just to listen and to get something.

As well as this, participants met outside of the workshops for social events such as walks on the seafront and coffee. The staff and volunteers, for their part, also invited them to their performances and exhibitions around the city, or out for group lunches, and arranged for transport to help them get there—thus accompanying them to further urban spaces.

Another important outcome of their encounters in Hearts & Minds’ workshops was the ability to practise desired languages and grow in confidence with using them. This was the case for Hasan:

Hasan: We meet many different people ... The theatre [workshop] make me to brave and talk. Even you are right, even you are wrong! Ha. Just like, say your thinking, your opinion, okay. Even if accepted or not, and making me brave to speaking ... I’m very shy boy, I don’t speak. If I saw someone I say, ‘oh my god, if I say her or he, “hi,” he will be respond or not?’ ... But after that, I see it’s not like that ... But before I very shy, I said no. If I say ‘hi,’ and he say me ‘*yeia sou* [hello],’ what can I ...?

Lucy: Agh! Ha ha. Run away!

Hasan: Ha ha. Yes!

This growing confidence was observed over the course of different programmes, and particularly among young women. After sitting out of some drama games at the beginning of a course, for example, after some time they would join in and use more English in front of the group—if still nervously giggling throughout. Alex, too, said that he had seen a particularly positive change in the confidence of the young women who attended:

The difference that I can see that's huge, like how they interact with people that they don't know ... I think all those projects ... participating in the creative things, just makes you more comfortable with your identity, who you are.

These arts-based educational encounters can therefore be described as valuable in young refugees' own terms, as they enabled them to meet their social goals of gaining cross-cultural connections, language skills, and confidence: the ingredients they felt they needed to overcome some of their everyday, local-level social challenges around the city. The following sections take a deeper look at how this was achieved. The first details the key promotional processes observed, before the next discusses some key issues to consider.

### 3.4 (Co-)creating valuable outcomes: Key processes

The range of nationalities in the arts workshops among youth, staff, and volunteers made for multilingual settings. The young refugees themselves spoke many different languages—whether from their home countries or picked up en route to Greece—and mostly these linguistic differences were welcomed and celebrated, including by being incorporated into activities. One key supportive element in this regard was the presence of multinational mediators, who could support youth in expressing themselves across linguistic barriers. As Hamid explained, regarding a drama workshop: 'For me, I had no problems. I prepared myself, with help [from] the others ... They had a translator ... He know Arabic ... and he speaks English *very* well.' The help of mediators enabled youth to participate more fully and share their ideas—as in one drama session, when a young Greek man was excitedly telling his group his idea in Greek and a volunteer assistant was translating it into English, with another translating that into French for two of his peers. With such mediation, informal conversations were also supported.

As well as via translation, interactions were also mediated via arts materials and activities which did not require language (or indeed literacy) skills in Greek or English. This principle was often actively employed, such as when facilitators used visual prompts to help explain tasks and give information. However, it also arose more naturally, when objects organically helped to start conversations. In one example from a painting workshop, a new participant was initially very hesitant to use the English she knew with the group—but after some time moving around a table drawing a collaborative story, and helping others to label pictures in Greek and Arabic, she gradually built up the courage to engage in conversations. Other researchers have also noted the significance of the materiality of arts-based encounters, and specifically the role of objects in inviting movement around a space, enabling and prompting conversations and new relations (across language and cultural divides), and overall effecting playful and embodied interactions (Askins and Pain 2011; Heckmann Erikson 2018; Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto 2019).

The activities mentioned above give an idea of the collaborative and interactive nature of the setting. Participants would frequently engage in pair and group work: including tasks such as performing songs, creating stop-motion animations, or making shapes using their bodies. Many activities, especially in the drama workshops, were based on trust and

being attentive and responsive to other participants—such as leading one another blind-folded around the studio, responding to subtle eye movements, or performing improvised scenes together. In addition, as also found by [Mayblin, Valentine and Andersson \(2016\)](#), ‘natural’, banal interactions were found to be equally important for developing relationships. During breaks and the wait for other participants to arrive, some refugee youth would take advantage of the chance to practise their Greek or other languages with the staff and volunteers. Others sat alone with their phones or crowded around someone else’s as they played games or shared videos, while their peers joked, smoked and chatted about everything from relationships to their countries’ geographies. In other words, they had a space to exercise a range of young adult interactions which helped them to develop friendships, outside of the structured activities which were designed to engineer them. This provides further evidence that unstructured leisure activities, based around hobbies and sports, can offer important opportunities for youth to develop their identities and initiative ([Abbott and Barber 2007](#)).

It also points to another important aspect of young refugees’ encounters in these arts education spaces: what [Case and Hunter \(2012\)](#) and [Michalovich \(2021\)](#) call ‘identity work’. Here, I use this term to specifically mean the opportunity to share skills, jokes, interests, and stories, on their own terms, while also working to break down stereotypes and determine their own visibility. Whereas in asylum interviews, the young refugees’ stories had to follow strict conventions in order to convey ‘deservingness’ and secure their legality, in these arts spaces, they could share their personal information in ways they preferred. They joked about the refugee experience during drama games, for example—such as in this example from my field notes, when a facilitator asked each group to form the shape of a boat:

The first group made a large, 2D ship, and the second a smaller one complete with deck, two sides and two people rowing. The first group teased the second for having a little boat. However, one of the young participants in the second group—who was standing and pretending to row furiously—said, ‘it’s a small boat, for refugees! Coming from Turkey!’ They all laughed.

This moment exemplified their ability to process and make light of their experiences during these arts sessions in a ‘safe’ space, alongside allies who would not misinterpret their jokes as them being undeserving of protection. As Alex put it, ‘making fun’ in this way ‘breaks the whole stereotype and the whole idea of, you know, “I’m a refugee and I can do only this” . . . For three hours it’s like a respite—I can have a break of my whole refugee thing.’ This means not only ‘breaking stereotypes’ for themselves, but also among the wider community—while also permitting them some ownership of city space and greater, more desirable visibility. This was the case with the outcome of one drama workshop, in which Hasan participated: ‘For three months we done the theatre project. And then . . . we doing very good, nice event, and the people came watching us in the city centre.’

Crucially, facilitators such as Alex worked to transform these temporary urban spaces into safe and supportive places of contact, allowing youth to step (or dance) out of their comfort zones. The youth, for their part, responded by showing him considerable respect. Hasan held him in particularly high regard, saying, ‘we don’t [have] a word for him. He’s very, very good.’ [Mayblin, Valentine and Andersson \(2016\)](#) also note the importance of

the facilitator in engineering meaningful contact, as they can mediate young people's conflicting views, give youth the confidence to share their opinions and emotions, and find ways forward. However, this facilitation—especially of arts projects that can cause difficult memories to surface—should be done with tact, care, and appropriate training (Wilson 2017; Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Kuusisto 2019).

### 3.5 Power, inclusivity, and motivation: Key considerations

This note about facilitation leads us to considerations of the refugee–solidarian relationship, and particularly the ways in which staff and volunteers mediated, or engaged in, interactions. Certainly, power relations between young refugees and Greek and other international staff and volunteers were ever unequal. Europeans and North Americans tended to be the donors, making financial contributions or bringing in-kind resources such as arts and crafts supplies. They were considered representatives of well-off populations who could afford to take months—or even years—off work to volunteer, while also having the legal rights to travel and stay. For both 'local' and international staff and volunteers, their relationship with young refugees was also didactic and one-way, putting them in the authoritative position of being holders and imparters of 'valuable' knowledge. In their practice, some would then engage in 'othering' by focusing too heavily on the refugee experience, instead of allowing youth to fully explore and share other facets of their identities. These issues exemplify what Askins and Pain (2011) refer to as the tense meeting of power, privilege, and otherness in the 'contact zone', and the fact that initiatives that rely on people's desire to 'help' can create an uneasy relationship of host and guest (Rast and Ghorashi, 2018)—something which is further complicated when contact zones are educational.

Another more specifically pedagogical point to consider relates to the nature of the tasks involved and the extent to which all members of the group felt able and willing to participate in them—in other words, their inclusivity. One issue observed in this particular site was cultural barriers. Despite using non-verbal and object-mediated approaches, some activities were easier to understand if the participants had played similar games at school, for example. Several assumed a specific base of knowledge—such as what university involves—which some youth, due to never having been in formal education, did not have. This caused them to lose motivation and confidence. Also of note were the divisions in participation according to gender. Some of the young women in the group would complain of aches or not attend at all if they knew that there would be intense physical exercise involved; while most of the young men, for their part, thrived on these activities. This compounded other gendered obstacles which affected their participation—such as being asked by their parents to take care of their much younger siblings, and having to bring them along. This limited their engagement in activities and ability to socialise freely with other attendees. All of the above illustrates the importance of taking intra-youth, intersectional issues into account when designing and running such programmes.

The final consideration, beyond young people's ability to participate in workshops, is their interest in the topic. If they were interested in painting and illustration, for example, then even if there was some confusion around instructions, the youth would still be motivated to attend and fully take part. This therefore increased the amount and quality of

interactions they engaged in, as they got to know the group, facilitators and volunteers over repeated sessions. This need for sustained interactions in arts education to routinise contact and foster transformative change has also been cited by other researchers (Askins and Pain 2011). In this way, young refugees can be guaranteed continued support—so long as the funding and their interest remain constant.

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

Research has shown that arts can be used as a means of protest and resistance, challenging common stereotypes and misrepresentations of refugees (e.g. Bhimji 2016). However, there is limited scholarship on the specific role of arts (education) as a means of refugees' social inclusion, or indeed, as a space for potentially positive interactions with the 'majority' public.

Drawing on young refugees' experiences in Thessaloniki, this article has demonstrated how arts workshops run by solidarians—and, potentially, NFE more generally—can function as an important creative (en)counterspace. This means a 'safe' space in which youth can meet and learn about one another, rebuild their confidence and navigate the everyday difficulties of their lives in Greece. Arts education gave them the tools to disrupt discriminatory practices at the everyday, local level: specifically, in gaining the language and confidence to speak back to misinformation and harmful narratives about refugees, and the opportunity to build long-term, trusting relationships within and beyond the (young) refugee community. The observed workshops involved several key promotive processes, which were catalysed by arts objects and practices: namely, the celebration of multilingualism; linguistic and cultural mediation; collaboration and interaction; 'identity work'; and facilitation by a leader who created a space of safety and support. These collective, creative methods enabled trust-building and self-expression via various forms of verbal and non-verbal communication. As well as these social benefits, this 'in-between' place also functioned as an effective counterspace: offering youth somewhere of their own and allowing them to reclaim physical space in the city (Case and Hunter 2012). Within it, they could be the host; they could joke with their friends and escape their daily challenges for a while; they could practise their old and new identities; and they could be at once invited into 'Greek' society (as multi-layered as it is) while having their own 'mini-society' at the margins. As such, they became sites of potentiality and re-creation, which—through use of the arts—facilitated what Hickey-Moody and Harrison (2018) refer to as the 'materialisation' of young participants' identities and connections to place.

The question which remains, however, for NGOs such as Hearts & Minds—which have the self-proclaimed aim of fostering inclusion—is 'inclusion into what?' While the youth praised the fact that they could meet people from Greece and beyond, often the volunteers working in these 'solidarity' spaces were young and Northern or Western European. As such, besides the few Greeks who led or took part in the courses, refugee youth were mostly meeting other refugees and migrants who were potentially only staying for short and/or indeterminate periods. The most stable relationships were those with other young refugees—and as mentioned above, familiar faces could be seen across programmes, which created something of a consistent learning community. While such opportunities for

refugee–refugee encounters and co-learning are very important, the lack of ‘cross-cultural’ contact with others beyond the refugee community could suggest that the programmes were falling short of their potential for wider social inclusion. Such arts workshops, then, could do more to build relationships between refugees and Greeks who share the city in the longer term—to extend the benefits further out of the confines of their physical spaces and project timelines. In this way, alongside efforts to advocate for structural and political change in the treatment of refugees, such bottom-up initiatives could begin to escort the communities created within these temporary settings out of the margins of city life.

With this said, it should also be recognised that the encounters in this study *did* result in a valuable experience for this particular group. While they may still have been a small community or ‘micro-public’ (Amin 2002) in a counterspace of their own, which gathered and remained at the margins of society, this does not necessarily depreciate what the space and contact within it signified for this particular group. As Closs Stephens and Squire (2012) note, you do not always need to make wider claims in order to demonstrate the value or meaningfulness of encounters, as they can also have value in and of themselves. Overall, these arts workshops had considerable potential as a constructive and creative place to spend time, and as a way to bring various social actors together. They served four important functions: first, they enabled communication, especially via non-verbal means, which provided the basis for meaningful encounters; secondly, they fostered a sense of belonging to a local community (even if only the local refugee and ‘solidarian’ community); thirdly, they permitted youth to reclaim aspects of urban space while hostile social actors tried to exclude them from others, such as public schools; and fourthly, they permitted youth to (re)present themselves and their backgrounds and stories as they wished—to govern their own visibility, even if only within this new mini-society. As such, arts workshops were found to be a productive space which enabled valuable encounters, connections and potentially—as a consequence—the disruption of everyday forms of exclusion.

In focusing on how refugee youth themselves felt about these encounters, this article has attempted to re-centre their agency and power in discussions of (engineered) encounters. It highlighted how youth are not only ‘thrown’ together in urban spaces, and have activities happen *to* them; rather, they enthusiastically seek out and *choose* to engage in such opportunities, and play an active role in how processes unravel (see also Christiansen, Galal and Hvenegaard-Lassen 2017). Furthermore, the article contributes to discussions on the specific role of creativity in the lives of young migrants. For refugee youth, collaboratively producing and sharing media in their own voices enables ownership of representations, the opportunity to expand and strengthen social networks, identity work, communication and learning through multimodal literacies, and visibility and engagement with audiences (Michalovich 2021); while also allowing them to engage in activism and, overall, exercise agency (Godin and Doná 2016) and navigate everyday borders (Pace 2017). This research offers an example of how this can be done, via specific promotive processes. To explore this potential further, future research could pay greater attention to arts-based initiatives led by refugees themselves—as this remains a considerable gap in the literature—as well as focusing in on the more specific dynamics of refugee–refugee and refugee–solidarian encounters in arts and educational settings. There could also be more attempts to blend the subject and tools of such research—i.e. using social arts as method—by using techniques such as participatory theatre

(e.g. [Opfermann 2020](#)) to foster relations among all involved in the research and commit to ‘conviviality as both a research practice and a research outcome’ ([Kaptani et al. 2021](#): 68).

In terms of practice and policy, the findings in this article emphasise the need to understand young refugees’ own goals—i.e. how and why they participate in educational offers or other forms of contact—and what to leverage to encourage deeper engagement. To ensure sustainable future opportunities to build on what has already been achieved, it is clear that longer term commitment from participants, facilitators, organisations, and funders needs to be actively encouraged. In addition, it appears that youth benefit from spaces and opportunities for informal contact (such as social events) around these structured programmes, as well as support for the interests which brought them to the workshops in the first place. On a wider scale, however, advocacy work needs to counteract new Greek legislation as of 2021 which has been said to ‘hinder civil society organisations’ ability to provide services and monitor the treatment of refugees and displaced people’ ([Choose Love 2021](#): 3)—which adds more bureaucratic and practical hurdles to the work of ‘solidarians’.

## Notes

1. In this article, for brevity, the term ‘refugee’ refers to both those who have been granted protection under the 1951 Convention and those who have applied for protection (i.e. asylum ‘seekers’ or ‘applicants’).
2. *Formal* education is that taking place in educational systems, which follows a syllabus and involves assessments; whereas *non-formal* education is that organised outside of the formal system in community settings such as NGOs, which focuses more on particular skills and does not lead to accreditation ([Council of Europe \(CoE\) 2019](#)).

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