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"Refugee tv" and "Refugees got talent" projects. Affective and decolonial geographies of invisible common spaces

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INTRODUCTION

CAN THE REFUGEE SPEAK (AND BE HEARD)?

In February 2016, while the Greece-Macedonia border was closed, some refugees set a U.N.H.C.R. table at the makeshift settlement in Idomeni and imitated international officials. As they described, 'we brought a table, a laptop, and we built an office' (cited in Dilon 2016). The participants in an improvised performance, shifted between the roles of refugees, U.N.H.C.R. officers and journalists covering the event.

However, if one approached closer one could read the sign on the table: 'United Nations, no information and no help'. As one of the organizers explained: 'Maybe the fake [UN] will find a solution for the refugees. But the real one finds no solution for people. For two months, the border [with Macedonia] has been closed. They did nothing' (cited in Dilon 2016). This collective action gave rise to the creation of the

"refugee tv". A self-organized initiative by the refugees residing at the Idomeni settlement, which challenged the official media representations of refugees and carried out a number of interviews and activities, reclaiming the voices of refugees at the camp, their hopes and dreams. As an organizer expressed: 'The refugees are full of dreams in the eyes and hope in the heart' (personal interview March 28, 2018).

By the end of May 2016, the refugees were relocated to 13 State-run camps on the outskirts of Thessaloniki, the largest city in northern Greece. However, all of the camps, as they are located on the western edge of the city, far away from the urban center, are isolated and invisible. They are based on abandoned former factories and former military bases that have severe infrastructural deficiencies. Health services, heating, running water, toilets and food are extremely poor. Thus, refugees often repeat that they feel 'nostalgic about the days at Idomeni' (personal interview October 24, 2018). In addition, journalists and activists are not allowed to enter the camps, and only a few accredited organizations have access. While both NGO employees and refugees are forbidden from taking pictures and videos inside the camps. At the same time, mainstream media often portray refugee camps as places of crime, violence and misery[1]. It is important to note here that most residents of Thessaloniki do not have any bodily contact and thus, sensory involvement with the refugee camps. This suggests that the spatial segregation of the refugee camps produces a form of "sensorial racism" (Hamilakis, 2013, p. 34) regime.

Yet, the collective action of the 'refugee tv' did not end with the evacuation of the informal settlement of Idomeni. In the hidden "non-places" of refugee camps the idea of "refugee tv" revived. The invisibility, the prohibition of access and imagery, and the wretched living conditions, but most importantly, the will and struggle of the inhabitants of the camps, turned "refugee tv" into the voice of the excluded and isolated refugees. In many camps "refugee tv" groups were organized and related facebook accounts were created and managed by the refugees themselves.

At this point, Spivak's (1988) critique of constructions of the "other" based on universalized Western concepts and assumptions, is important in understanding the operations, effects and affects of "refugee tv". Spivak (1988) in her popular paper 'Can the subaltern speak?', explores the possibility of subalterns, the populations subordinated to hegemonic structures (of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.),

to speak on themselves. In the case of "refugee tv" and "refugees got talent", the following questions could be added: Can the refugee dream and hope? Can the refugee cry, protest and demonstrate? Can the refugee's claims be heard? Can the refugee's body inhabit the city? Can the refugee have access to affordable housing, health, education, work? Can the refugee taste, sing and dance? These questions consider and underline the right of refugees to a decent and multi-sensory living.

This paper centered on the above framework and based on participatory observation, ethnography, semi-structured interviews and militant research, conducted between 2016-2018, explores the subversive practices of the newcomers. The way refugees employed mimicking practices and parody to challenge official representations and power relations, claim visibility, reinvent a culture of coexistence and sharing, and produce hybrid common spaces. In order to protect refugees' personal data, the research participants' names are not included here. The paper employs instead the name "refugee tv", referring to a collective – multitude subject, that through "narrativizable action-reaction" (Massumi, 1995, p. 88) produces potential "lines of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983/1972), realms of possibility to rearticulate the thoughts and desires of many other refugees.

The first section of the paper discusses the theoretical approaches to autonomy of migration, spatial commons and enclosures, and considers how these could be enriched with affect and decolonial geographies theories. The following section presents the "refugee tv" collective in Idomeni and Thessaloniki and the "refugees got talent" project at the refugee camp of Oreokastro in the outskirts of Thessaloniki, through conversations with participants. Finally, the paper presents some concluding remarks on the decolonial and affective character of the suggested common spaces created by refugees.

THEORETICAL APPROACH. AFFECTIVE AND DECOLONIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF INVISIBLE COMMON SPACES

As the 'refugee tv' group points out:

'Journalists come here, they do interviews, they take photos of refugees and then

they go back home and show what they want to show (…) What we plan to do is show people what refugees want people to see, and this time we get to decide, not journalists' (cited in Owens, 2016).

'Usually, when someone talks about the refugees' camp, he or she looks at us compassionately. But not, the reality is not that. People carry with them their cultures, habits, customs, their special skills, and in the camp during the "refugees got talent" we had the opportunity to share all of them' (personal interview September 23, 2018).

Refugees are mostly depicted in the debate on migration, either as a potential threat to the local population (De Genova, 2017; New Keywords Collective, 2016) or as victims, helpless people seeking help from NGOs, humanitarian organizations, activists and State structures (Gabiam, 2012; Ihlen, et al. 2015; Reimann, 2006).

Against this double bind of criminalization and victimization of refugees, different approaches to migration have emerged. These are based on postcolonial studies and have as point of departure the work of Fanon and his stance on colonialism. According to Fanon, 'colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip (…). By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.' (Fanon, 1963/1961, pp. 210-211). Furthermore, Said's (1978) critical work "Orientalism" argued that colonialism functioned not only as a military and economic sovereignty but also as a discursive hegemony. While scholars (Guha, 1982; Arnold, 1977; Chakrabarty, 1992; Chatterjee, 1986) of the "subaltern" approach focused on the "small everyday struggles", following the Gramscian anti-hegemonic "local resistance actions" of local populations. Significant is also the contribution of Bhabha (1994), and his concept of "hybridity", that describes the creation of new cultures as nonlinear and unpredictable "intersections", "magmas", "mutations", "bastards", that have the ability to challenge, judge and destabilize previous cultures. Important in Bhabha's analysis (1994, p. 86) is the observation that the culture of the colonizers is never fully copied by colonized local populations, but it is hybridized. In this case, appropriation of colonial culture often involves repetition, imitation, mimicry, and mockery. Against perceptions of normalization and clear delimitation of cultures, hybridity for Bhabha (1994, pp. 6, 13, 22, 113, 193) is the "heretic", the "in-between", "ambivalent", "contested", "semi-visible", "quasi-invisible", contin-

gent "location of culture". In the hybrid location of culture, according to Bhabha, a series of processes are taking place, such as: "presentation-recognition", "translation", "subversion", "camouflage", "relocation" and "reinscription". The concept of hybridity has been adopted by various scholars (Brah & Coombes, 2000; Downey et al., 2016; Soja, 1996), while also new terms have been proposed in an attempt to capture the processes of cultural hybridization. Characteristic of these are the terms "transculturation", which refers to the mixing of the dominant and subaltern culture, and "nomadization", a concept that seeks to demonstrate the destabilization of identities, either metaphorically or as a result of immigration. Also, several terms refer to the geographical spaces in which mixing and hybridity take place, such as: "liminal space", "heterotopia", "borderlands" and "third space" (Knox & Pinch, 2010/1982).

In the field of postcolonial studies, Spivak' work departs from Fanon's and Said's analysis, and subaltern approaches, and highlights the importance of the intersections of capital, gender, ethnicity and culture. In particular, Spivak's criticism to subaltern scholars focuses on three points. First, Spivak argues that the concept of "subaltern" is a homogenous category that obscures internal differences; while she emphasizes the many "silent subalterns" inside the "subaltern" (Spivak, 1990). Second, she argues that the "subaltern" rhetoric victimizes subjects as it names them subaltern and locates them within "lower and upper classes" dipoles. Third, Spivak accuses "subaltern" scholars of dividing culture, economy, ethnicity into separate spheres, while at the same time degrading the issue of gender. Finally, Spivak argues that those who suffer from discrimination should not be called "subaltern". Spivak (2003) does not support the approaches on the dichotomies subordinate-dominant, West-East, North-South, first world-third world, colonial-colonialist, indigenous culture-foreign culture. Spivak throughout her work highlights the post-colonial subject as the agent that crosses boundaries of structured classifications and categories, and destabilizes the systemic or rigid identities.

In order to understand social relations in the production of common spaces, we need to take into account also decolonial geographies (Jazeel, 2014; McFarlane, 2006; Robinson, 2011; Roy, 2011; Simone, 2010). Decolonial geographies attempt to deconstruct Western geographic classifications and taxonomies aiming at the de-westernization of geographic theory, that is the so-called dismantling of the Western

gaze and speech. At the same time, they highlight the multiplicity of subaltern subject positions, while they focus on the examination of the intermediate, heterotopic and hybrid forms in the production of space.

In line with the above-mentioned genealogy of post-colonial approaches and deco-lonial geographies, several scholars (Casas-Cortes, et al. 2015; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Nyers, 2015) have endorsed the perspective of "autonomy of migration". The "autonomy of migration" approach, following the tradition of "autonomous Marxism" on the autonomy of labour power against capital (Bell & Cleaver, 1989), attempts to reverse the polarity between "structures" and "agency". It focuses on the ability of the moving populations of migrants and refugees, the so-called "protagonists" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2003), to act, cross borders and challenge immigration control structures such as States and hyper-States agreements, army-police-border guards, registration and control systems. Many works that develop the "autonomy of migration" approach (De Genova, et al. 2018; Kapsali & Tsavdaroglou, 2016; Mitropoulos, 2007; Nyers, 2015; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013), take into account the discussion on "com-mons" and "enclosures", and they introduce the concept of "mobile commons". That is, forms of solidarity and commoning among refugees who self-organize political and social struggles, negotiate multiple cultural, gender, political and ethnic identities and often produce "common spaces" (Trimikliniotis, et al. 2015).

Therefore, crucial in the "mobile commons" approach, i.e. the commons of mov-ing populations, are the various modes of communication, negotiation and co-de-cision on the rules, values and practices of sharing. As De Angelis (2010, p. 958) insightfully comments, 'commoning is not only based on pre-existent values, preex-istent "ethical" choices. The commoning (…) is also and most importantly a field of production of values'. But although many studies (De Angelis, 2017; Singh, 2017; Stavrides, 2016; Tsavdaroglou, 2018) have acknowledged the verbal form of com-mons, the so-called "commoning" as the most critical dimension of commons, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of commoning relations among refugees. These relations might be concealed and invisible and difficult to approach from a Western centered perspective. Hence, the study of such relations requires a constant focus on emergent affective and intimate interactions.

For this purpose, I draw on theories of affect in order to examine the bodily and

emotional practices of reciprocity, waiting, hope, coexistence and struggle. For instance, Deleuze and Guattari (1994, pp. 168-9), inspired by Spinoza's (1996/1677) theory of unity of "mind and body", explored and underlined the capabilities and potentialities of bodies to act, influence and affect each other. This draws attention to an important aspect of the embodied relations between refugees, and the way these can give way to affective potential and affective "openness" (Massumi, 1995, p. 96), against border closures and the isolation of refugee camps.

I would like to return to the question of whether the refugee can speak and be heard, and perhaps extend the question to ask 'how does this subject feel' (Muñoz, 2006) and how the experience of trauma relates to the invention of a 'project of collective sensory detection' (Berlant, 2008, p. 846). These questions direct attention beyond the right to cross a physical border, and the right to representation and speech. They emphasize not only the autonomy of seeing and speech, but also a multi-sensory claim and the autonomy of affect. As Massumi (1995, p. 96) argues 'the autonomy of affect is (…) its openness. Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is'. And this process is absolutely political. As several thinkers propose, senses, emotions and affects are political (Avramopoulou, 2018; Hamilakis, 2013; Massumi, 2015; Woodward, 2014). In this sense, the projects of "refugee tv" and "refugees got talent" experimented with the possibility of expressing the voice, the eyes, the bodies, the senses, the feelings and affects of refugees in extremely precarious conditions.

REFUGEE TV:
TOWARDS VISIBILITY OF A HIDDEN COMMON SPACE

This section is based on a conversation with members of the "refugee tv".

Charalampos, question: Please, could you describe in a few words the situation in Idomeni makeshift camp, and how refugees reacted to the sealing of the borders?

Refugee tv: The situation was extremely difficult. The weather was very bad, there was lack of medicines, food was not enough, most people were sick, no one informed us about the border situation. So, because of this miserable condition, people started

to organize themselves, to organize protests and hunger strikes, to claim not just bet-ter quality of food, but the opening of the borders. The refugees actually complained because they wanted a better future and what they received from the authorities was the closure of the border in front of their eyes. Many said that they preferred to have remained in Syria and die there of bombs rather than face the slow death at the border of Macedonia.

Charalampos, question: The conditions of poverty and misery were the main ma-terial for local and global media representations. How was the situation in Idomeni covered by the mainstream media? Were you happy with the views and pictures de-picted?

Refugee tv: We watched every day dozens of journalists and cameramen from everywhere coming to Idomeni and taking videos and pictures of the refugees suffer-ing, praying for food, children playing in the mud, mice and snakes around the tents, people fighting. Journalists, like crows thirsty for blood, mocked us and they were not interested in hearing our voices or helping us. They just wanted to videotape the refugees suffering while media companies were making money.

Charalampos, question: What did you think about this? Was this condition that prompted you to organize the "refugee tv"?

Refugee tv: We all agreed that we had to react and the best way we thought was to do something satirical. So, we got a piece of wood and a small plastic bottle and we made a fake camera and with a cable we found on the street and the can of a teargas we tied to some shocks with a plastic cup of tea, we made a fake microphone. One friend hold the fake camera, the another the microphone and we went around the refugees performing the reporters.

Charalampos, question: Did this have a positive response from the other refugees? Did they trust you?

Refugee tv: Yes of course! We became somehow the voice of the refugees. Refu-gees trusted us because we were like them, in the same situation, we were not liars like the mainstream media journalists and here is the interesting point. While we did a fake camera action with a fake microphone, the interviews we made were much more real and powerful. From that moment, the refugees refused to give interviews to the mainstream media channels, since they had their own.

Charalampos, question: Was it difficult to break the ice, to convince the other refugees to talk to you?

Refugee tv: Our action was funny, playful, people were enjoying, laughing at the fake camera and this immediately broke the ice. We became friends, the other refugees trusted us, thus we came close and they talked to us from their hearts.

Charalampos question: What was the purpose of your action, what exactly did you want to show? Did you address all refugees regardless of gender, nationality, age and religion?

Refugee tv: Here I would like to emphasize that we made interviews with all refugees without discriminating on the grounds of nationality, gender, religion or age. Most importantly, we tried to show the positive side of the refugees, not just the bad conditions as the mainstream media did, but that each refugee has some unique talents and skills. Some of the refugees are doctors, professors, teachers, lawyers, they have studied, others are artists, actors, painters, singers, musicians, footballers, cookers, hairdressers. Everyone has some talent and a dream of what he or she wants to do or continue to do and this is what we wanted to highlight.

REFUGEES GOT TALENT:
COMMONING PRACTICES IN A CAMP

This section is based on a conversation with the organizers of the "refugees got talent" and "refugee tv".

Charalampos, question: How was the situation in the camps and how the idea of "refugees got talent" was really born?

Refugee tv: In the camps it is forbidden to take videos and photos, they are controlled by the army or the police. I remember I had an idea of making a television program and the authorities did not give us permission. Then, we thought of the talents of the refugees and of organizing something like the reality show "Arabs got talent" that broadcasts in Syria or a similar television series here in Greece. Thus, the "refugees got talent" was born. The first one took place an afternoon in the Oreokastro camp and we video-recorded it in order to show the different skills and talents of refugees.

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Charalampos, question: How the "refugees got talent" was organized exactly?

Refugee tv: We put together an informal organizing team, we set a few tables, we prepared a "refugees got talent" logo on a board and we live streamed it on facebook. This way refugees from other camps could watch it and participate by voting for best contestant-talented. Approximately 3,000 refugees from the camps around Thessaloniki participated in the poll. Of course, the most important thing was not who would win, but the fact that refugees came out of a state of apathy that prevails in the camps and remembered that they have talents and skills, and that they could do many things.

Charalampos, question: What was the overall feeling in the camp?

Refugee tv: We loved it so much, it was like an improvised theatrical performance, all the refugees from the camp were present, especially the children were very entertained.

Charalampos, question: What you believe the "refugees got talent" offered to the people in the camp?

Refugee tv: It was very empowering for everyone. Most importantly, the refugees realized that they have dignity and therefore they can hope. They realized that life is going on. You know, when you are locked in a small room you try to do something, to escape, you are looking to find the window, you are looking at the door as if it has cracks, you believe that maybe you could break the wall. In fact, you are trying to get out what you have inside you and to show, to tell to the outside world that you are here.

Charalampos, question: Tell us a few words about the situation in the camp, what has changed after the "refugees got talent"?

Refugee tv: Life in the camp was definitely very difficult. However, especially after organizing "refugees got talent" and many other collective actions, if you look at the daily routine around, you will see that there were several interesting collective moments. Many young refugees play football, others cook together, others drink tea in large groups, others do language lessons to other refugees. The group of "refugee tv" did activities as a school for children, music lessons, video and editing lessons to convey the life of the camp to the outside world. In a way, everyone was trying, apart from being biologically preserved, to maintain or improve their skills and culture. Life in the camp was like living in a big house, after a few days you knew everyone.

Charalampos, question: Were there any communal and care practices among the refugees?

Refugee tv: Yes, indeed, a kind of community has been shaped in the camp, strong friendships have been created, people have developed sharing and mutual care practices. People who had never met before, from very different places, countries and religions came close, met and shared their anxieties and their problems. A large multinational and multilingual family was formed.

CONCLUDING COMMENT.
REIMAGINING A DECOLONIAL
AND AFFECTIVE COMMON SPACE

In this paper, I sought to illustrate how the newcomers employ practices of imitation, parody, and mockery in order to claim visibility, and create in-common cultures of sharing and hybrid common spaces. To conclude, I would like to emphasize the following three comments that "refugee tv" and "refugees got talent" projects figured out on how common spaces are emerged.

During the "refugees got talent" project, the organizers together with participants smoked shisha, drank tea, played the guitar and sang songs from their home countries. Thus, one night under the impromptu lighting and amidst the smells of freshly cooked food, one of the contestants grabbed a cooking pot, turned it upside down and made an improvised drum. People gathered and started singing and when the song ended, the performer stepped forward and hugged each one in the crowd. The multiple gestures and sensory relations, the experiences of touch and being touched, listen and being listened to, look and to being looked at, seemed to collapse the borders and boundaries between subject and object, world and body, thought and body, and between different bodies. It could be said that the gestures and contacts produced an "inter-corporeal" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1945) and "inter-animated" (Hamilakis, 2013) common space. A common space of interconnectedness, simultaneous perception and experience through interaction. As Merleau-Ponty (1964/1961, p. 162) points out 'that which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what

it sees, the "other side" of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself." What was clear in the "refugees got talent", was participants' smiles of satisfaction and proximity. It was exhibited a nexus of acoustic, visual, taste, smell, tactile and kinesthetic interactions, that even briefly challenged refugees' precarious conditions and imposed social and spatial exclusion. In their words 'our songs are a storytelling of how were our lives before the war in Syria, and it was as if we had completely forgotten the pain and trauma' (personal interview, December 5, 2018). Therefore, the multi-sensory affectivity is political and critical in processes of producing common spaces.

In addition, refugees through practices of "relocation" and "reinscription" (Bhabha, 1994) created a new collective and personal space in the non-place of Idomeni and in the camp. They sought to turn the blocked "borderland" into a hybrid common space. Important in this was peoples' memory, and the recall of previous experiences through which refugees maintained hope and faced the conditions of endless waiting. For example, during the "refugees got talent" a teenager participant that sang a rap song explained to the panel members that he had not sang rap in the past. As he described, "his girlfriend in Aleppo loved rap music", and since the day she was killed in a bombing he is trying to learn and practice rapping in order to keep her memory alive. Through the "refugees got talent" he shared and expressed his love for her. In a similar way, many more participants recalled memories of beloved persons that were killed in the war zones of Middle East.

Hence, through memory new relations of proximity and trust emerged. As Bergson (1991/1908, p. 133) argues, 'there is no perception which is not full of memories' and as many scholars (Cole, 1998; Connerton, 1989; Hamilakis, 2013) emphasize, memory is a social and collective process that generates collective, inter-subjective and corporeal-somatic experiences. Furthermore, as Benjamin (1999, p. 211) shows, an "involuntary memory" (*mémoire involontaire*) might produce "disorders" and "dissensus" (Ranciere, 2004), landscapes against voluntary objectified memories. From the above we could say that common spaces emerge through the sharing of inter-corporeal experiences and narrativized memory journeys, that can mobilize desires and imaginations and activate common spaces as a collective affectivity of claim and dissensus.

Finally, the projects of "refugee tv" and "refugees got talent" appeared to offer a voice to seemingly "voiceless" and "subaltern" subjects and to destabilize, even temporary, the refugeeness as a homogeneous category. As the organizers often repeated, their goal was to highlight the different talents and skills of each refugee, to break social, political, ethnic and sensory based stereotypes, and to claim the right to speak, experience, dream, hope and struggle. Therefore, the common space emerges as a collective struggle, as relations of solidarity and mutual help and as an attempt to ensure the diversity and uniqueness of every commoner. As one of the "refugee tv" members said: 'no matter what happens (…) in the future, (…) [we] will always have the talent show' (cited in Skarlatos, 2017).

In conclusion, this paper suggests that the study of the common space has to be enriched with sensorial and emotional geographies, studies on affective practices of belonging, of being in common in and through multiple bodily and sensory interactions, intimacy and reciprocity in everyday life.

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NOTES

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(available at: https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/785095/thessaloniki-ora-miden-pros-fuges-kai-metanastes-katakluzoun-tin-poli/ 2018/11/25); 'Instructions to soldiers on crime at hot spots!', Πρώτο Θέμα, March 17, 2017 [in Greek] (available at: https://www.protothe-ma.gr/greece/article/663260/odigies-stous-stratiotikous-gia-tin-eglimatikotita-sta-hot-spots/ 2018/11/25); 'The unprecedented cycle of violence in the hotspot of shame', To BHMA, October 7, 2018 [in Greek] (available at: https://www.tovima.gr/printed_post/o-protofanis-kyklos-tis-vias-lfsto-hotspot-lftis-ntropis/ 2018/11/25); 'How the country turned into an endless Hot Spot', Δημοκρατία, May 1, 2018; [in Greek] (available at: https://www.dimokratianews.gr/con-tent/85758/pos-i-hora-metetrapi-se-aperanto-hot-spot 2018/11/25); 'A mob of Muslims attacked Christians in the hot spot' July 7, 2018 [in Greek] (available at: https://enantion.gr/2018/07/07/ 2018/11/25); 'Greek police is afraid for a dominoes of uprisings in hotspots', THE TOC, October 28, 2016 [in Greek] (available at: http://www.thetoc.gr/koinwnia/article/ntomino-eksegersewn-sta-hotspots-twn-nisiwn-fobatai-i-elas 2018/11/25).

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