

Multicultural libraries in a bordered world: the case of ECHO for Refugees

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Abstract:

This paper examines the practice of multiculturalism by a mobile library servicing refugee camps and marginalised communities in and around the Athens area, placing this practice into dialogue with the IFLA/UNESCO 2008 'Manifesto for Multicultural Libraries'. This paper interrogates the realities of 'multiculturalism' in a bordered world of inequalities and restricted movement through the prism of the (im)mobility of the library and its communities, concluding that successful multicultural practice in such a context requires awareness of and tangible action to tackle these inequalities.

Keywords: refugees, education, Greece, library, migration.

ECHO for Refugees ("ECHO") is a library in a van that visits refugee camps and community centres in and around Athens. We are honoured that the library has been nominated for an award for 'Multicultural Practice' and intend to use this paper as a platform to share information about the work that we do whilst engaging constructively with the theme 'dialogue for change'. As Witt and Smith note, 'progressive issues concerning social justice and human rights are increasingly becoming the focal points of librarianship' (2019: 5). In the following paper, which draws on our experience working at the edges of 'Fortress Europe' (ECFR 2017, Amnesty International 2014), we hope to inspire discussion and action regarding the role of multicultural libraries in an increasingly bordered world.

IFLA states that:

(l)ibraries throughout the world have a strong history of responding to natural disasters and humanitarian crises by providing a welcoming environment, a place of refuge for body and soul, and a source of information. As we have watched the refugee crisis unfold in Europe we have been flooded with examples of how public libraries have responded in practical and heartfelt ways (IFLA 2015).

The ECHO library on wheels, established in 2016 to respond to the needs of those caught in the so-called ‘European migrant crisis’, is a proud bearer of this heritage. Placed at the geographical outer-limit of the European Union, Greece is a primary receiver of refugees and migrants from war-beleaguered countries, and those countries that have been historically underdeveloped through colonial economic systems (Sassen, 2012). ECHO responds to this crisis, most specifically to the deliberate geographical isolation which denies affected access to established libraries and to necessary and relevant library resources.

We commend the IFLA/UNESCO Manifesto (2008), and see our practice reflected in it. Similarly, we welcome the IFLA’s recent commitment to:

supporting the UN2030 Goals to ensure that the information access, educational structures, and social role of libraries is both integrated into solutions for the world’s pressing problems and available to the people, societies, and cultures served by the collections, services, and leadership of the library community (IFLA/UNESCO Manifesto 2008, 3).

In the context of the ‘dialogue for change’, we want to push this further. We believe that the lens of multiculturalism allows a lot of the root issues that face our library users to fall outside of its scope. The forces that compel cultures to collide for many of our communities are ones of systemic and life-threatening inequities. From our perspective here in Athens, it seems that for practice to be truly multicultural, it must be attentive not only to the specificities of multiple cultures amongst its potential user base, but to fully acknowledge and respond to the conditions in which diverse groups live.

In detailing our practice in Athens and within the chosen theme of ‘dialogue for change’ we urge a reassessment of the conception of multiculturalism and the movement of people; to rethink what ‘inclusivity’ means in a world of borders and climate breakdown; and to reconsider the role of libraries in dismantling what some provocatively term ‘global apartheid’ (Richmond 1994).

We begin by describing the context in which we work; first globally, then locally. We will then describe the model of ECHO for Refugees - our mission, codes of conduct, collection, programs and the structure of an average session. We will highlight the ways in which we practice multiculturalism in dialogue with the 2008 Manifesto and to demonstrate where it can go further. We will focus on our attempts to support mother tongue languages, language learning, intercultural dialogue and our diverse staffing model.

Context

The global context



camp in northern Greece, 2016

The IFLA and UNESCO rightly highlight that we live in an ‘increasingly heterogeneous society’, buttressed by an international migration rate that grows year on year (IFLA/UNESCO *ibid*). The IFLA diagnoses the causes of this as ‘globalization, increased migration, faster communication, ease of transportation and other 21st century forces’, and identifies the results as ‘increased cultural diversity’. From the borderlands, we realise that this notion of a porous world which supposedly increasingly facilitates migration must be complicated and we recognise the unequal access to resources this has entailed; ‘market capitalist systems generate mobility; nation state systems limit the rights and entitlements of migrants; and these systems combine in hybrid migration regimes and use and exploit migrant labour’ (Sassen 1996, 23) that has increased global inequality (World Inequality Report 2018). Global movement of capital forces human migration, whilst borders and nation state systems limit the rights and entitlements of refugees and migrants, creating a hybrid regime where people from the global south are forced to move but denied rights when they do (Truong et al 2014, 23). People also move to escape conflicts often fought by proxy powers (Sassen 1996, 71) or conflicts that occur along borders drawn by colonial powers with little regard for local practice (Visalli 2013), and attempt to resettle in receiving countries which have exerted influence on their country of origin. Furthermore, it is becoming clear that climate breakdown is already driving millions from their homes in the global South, a trend only set to continue. The number of climate refugees will dwarf those that have fled the Syrian conflict within the decade (Environmental Justice Foundation 2017).

Thus, working with refugees caught at the border of Europe teaches us about the restrictions placed on the movement of people and challenges the image of a harmonious ‘global society’. The restrictions that richer countries place on human migration across their borders are increasingly militarised (Loshitzky 2006). This enforced separation of people between the richer and poorer nations of the world exists alongside increasing economic interdependence, where money flows across the border but people cannot. Scholars have drawn attention to how this mimics South Africa’s Apartheid which ended in 1994 (Richmond 1994). Many convincingly argue that we should buttress terms like ‘multiculturalism’ with the concept ‘global apartheid’ to better classify and criticise ‘the structures of control that securitise the north and foster violence in the south, that gate the north and imprison the south, and that create a new militarised form of apartheid on a global level’ (Besteman 2019). It is within this context of a bordered world that ECHO for Refugees operates.

The local context: Greece

Greece is positioned at the ‘faultline’ between continents; the first arrival country into wealthier EU nations from Turkey. In 2015, the so-called ‘European Migrant Crisis’ began. Escalations in violence in Syria and Afghanistan increased the number of people travelling from these countries towards Europe through Greece. EU nations responded to this with the closure of the ‘Balkan Route’ and the March 2016 EU-Turkey Deal (Amnesty 2019). This resulted in the kettling of migrants within Greece, and today some 70,500 officially registered refugees and asylum seekers reside here, with 63,700 of them on the mainland (UNHCR 2019). It is in this context that ECHO Library was set up, founded by a group of individuals volunteering in an informal camp 20km south of the Greece-FRYOM border (ECHO for Refugees 2019). It is important to note that within a global context, this migration pattern does not represent a ‘crisis’, insomuch as it is in keeping with global trends (Fernando and Giordana 2016). Numbers have since decreased but in no way flatlined (Amnesty *ibid*).



Refugees and migrants gather at a petrol station at the Greek-Macedonian border. ECHO 2016

The immediate context: refugee camps in the Attica region

Since 2016, the library has been based around Athens in order to serve the large number of camps and community centres that exist here. The camps are spatially and socially peripheral, segregated from Greek communities, thus inhibiting residents' ability to construct a life in dialogue with local society. Whilst residents are legally allowed to move in and out of the camp, many cannot afford to and fear violence, from state and non-state figures, when they do. The national border thus reinscribes itself around the camp such that, at best, they can be described as 'included exclusion' (Agamben 1998). The disempowering effects of this isolation are compounded by the often deplorable conditions (Merminod and Baster 2019) and sense of precarity. In this respect, while the camps are host to multiple cultures, it is difficult for a sense of multicultural community to arise when 'neither those in charge of establishing the camps nor those who inhabit them know how long the camp will remain, or for how long the individual will stay in the camp' (Turner 2016, 142). Furthermore, scarcity of resources and overcrowding often produces tension between groups rather than enabling harmonious co-existence. The work we do in city spaces demonstrates that this is not simply a camp problem; refugees experiencing street homelessness and living in squatted accommodation are also a highly vulnerable population. However, the residents of these camps are our primary target group as, due to their relative isolation and our transport capabilities, we are uniquely positioned to provide for their needs.

ECHO's library model

ECHO's mission

The IFLA states that ‘the library should have a policy and a strategic plan, defining its mission, objectives, priorities and services related to cultural diversity. The plan should be based on a comprehensive user needs analysis and adequate resources’ (IFLA/UNESCO 2008). ECHO’s mission, as established at our foundation in 2016, was to ‘go where we must, and do what we can, to create spaces for learning and community within refugee camps’ as we are committed to ‘transform the sites in which we work from places of stagnancy and waiting, to places where dreams and drive remain alive’ (ECHO 2019). We planned to do this by targeting peripheral camps reachable from a city-centre base, whilst maintaining a diverse team sensitive to the changing and localised needs of the community that we serve. The flexibility of this strategy allows us to remain responsive to our highly changeable situation, and we remain committed to practising it.

The library space and the services

The library exists inside a converted 3.5 tonne LBV 400 Van. We run sessions using the van as a focal point and extend activities outside it. We welcome adults and young people into the van where they can find WiFi, comfortable seats, language learning resources and browse our collection. Outside we set up our gazebo with table, chairs and rugs for sitting on. Our collection consists of around 270 books in a range of commonly spoken languages: Farsi,



a library user, 2018

Arabic, Turkish, Kurmanji, French, English, German, Greek and Urdu. We stock fiction titles, textbooks, children’s books and staged English learning books for those learning English as a second language. We print and distribute basic language resources from mother tongue

languages into English and Greek. These offer translations of key vocabulary, including medical language and phrases to express basic needs, and are particularly popular with people who have just arrived in camps - to date we have distributed an estimated 10,000. We also offer access to online University courses through Coursera – fifty two of our library users have received awards through this programme so far, and thirty more are currently enrolled in study.



Inside the library 2016

The sessions

Each one of our sessions is different; we are a social space constructed by our communities. As White notes, libraries always represent different things to different people (2012, as quoted in Smart 2019, 17) and our host of resources mean we operate as a lending library, a mum's club, a homework resource, a first port of call for urgent language resources, an information hub, a community centre and, every so often, a climbing frame. When we arrive in each location we unload the resources for our language classes and the equipment for our child-friendly space. We are immediately met by children and regular library users, keen to return completed books and enquiring about new stock.

At Oinofyta Camp, for example, a session begins with a scramble of small hands for *deftar* and *kitab* from our children's box, and setting up the table for the Greek lesson at the back of the concrete, ex-industrial building. Our interpreters and co-ordinators take time to walk around the camp, reaching out to those who may not know of the services we provide. Throughout the session we are joined by familiar faces and new arrivals, who come to sit together in the shady space of the van, use the WiFi, and talk.

At Malakasa Camp, the majority of our library users are Afghani. It is a big camp, with over two thousand living in containers and tents. Here, we loan a lot of books in Farsi from inside the van. Meanwhile, outside, groups of young people congregate by the library on their way home from school. Their school days are short – 9am until 12pm – so we provide support sessions for those interested in maths activities, Greek practice and learning guitar.

At Lavrio, on the other hand, most of our library users are Kurdish, with most recent arrivals having fled Syrian-Kurdistan where violent attacks are still endemic. We offer books in Kurmanji, a Kurdish language officially banned in Syria since 1989 (Ibrahim 2017), alongside Arabic and Turkish which are also widely spoken here. Children in the camp are yet to enter the formal Greek education system, so we support parents by loaning them Greek children's books to help them prepare. Lavrio is a small, self-run camp, and the library often becomes an impromptu community space, with tea and fruit. The community here has taken in an older Greek woman, who was previously living alone in the town, and is always up for a chat and a read. In Lavrio, our role is primarily to facilitate the hospitality and cultural dialogue instigated by the residents themselves.



A library session at Malakasa camp.

.Our reach

Since the beginning of 2019 we have been expanding our schedule to reach as many users as possible. We now run sessions across four days at six camps and four community centres. 20% of our book loans are of Arabic books, 31% Farsi, and 34.3% English. While our loan statistics reveal our average book loaner to be a young Syrian woman between the ages of 20 and 25, a diverse range of people access the library.

Stocking our collection

As with all grassroots projects operating in Athens and the surrounding camps, we often find ourselves in a precarious situation. Our books come from donations by individuals, groups, and organisations including BookAid. Our registration in and subsequent plethora of contacts in England supply us with sufficient crowdsourced English language titles and being visible in Athens provides many donations of Greek books from the local community. For our range of non-European languages we strive to foster strong cross-border inter-organisational relationships. For example, Humanity Crew - a Palestinian mental health organisation operating in Athens - recently sourced us over 500 Arabic books. Indeed, our multicultural library could not be ‘developed in isolation’ (IFLA 2008) and we rely upon ‘cooperation with relevant... professionals at local, national [and] international level[s]’. However, some titles are harder to obtain, like books in Farsi, Pashto and Kurmanji. To supplement this scarcity we outreach to libraries and publishing houses with access to these titles, and we hope to reach out and build partnerships with larger libraries that might be able to support us.

ECHO’s Multicultural Practice

We embrace the IFLA/UNESCO 2008 Manifesto for Multicultural Libraries definition of multiculturalism as the ‘harmonious co-existence and interaction of different cultures’ and acknowledge that ‘multiculturalism is the foundation of our collective strength in our local communities and in our global society’. Despite this, our experience of practicing multiculturalism leads us to attend also to global and local inequalities of power and resources in order to do so.



A library user. 2016.

Providing access regardless of nationality

At ECHO we strive ‘to serve all members of the community without discrimination based on cultural and linguistic heritage’ (IFLA/UNESCO 2008). We welcome the IFLA’s prompt to pay ‘special attention’ to ‘groups which are often marginalized in culturally diverse societies’ including ‘minorities, asylum seekers and refugees, residents with a temporary residence permit [and] migrant workers’. These groups form the core of our library base. This is reflected in our Code of Conduct, in which we agree to ‘treat everyone with respect and try to facilitate access to ECHO’s services regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, political or religious convictions’ (ECHO 2019). This is an active process. We disseminate information about the services we provide in the form of flyers, posters and social media posts in the languages that our library users speak. We knock door to door, tent to tent, employing the language skills of our team to inform people of our presence. The responsibility for reaching out is ours; while we require action on behalf of the residents to attend our sessions, it is beholden to us to travel to the right locations with the appropriate staff, outreach materials and resources to facilitate truly open access.

Providing access to literature in mother tongue languages

ECHO provides literature in mother tongue languages to minority groups around Athens who would not otherwise have access to them, this way ‘encouraging linguistic diversity and respect for the mother tongue’ (IFLA/UNESCO 2008). This is vital to give people access to literature in their mother tongue language - for a piece of home, for community building, and for survival. It is particularly important for those who have been denied their education due to displacement or have been forbidden from practising their mother tongue. Many children we work with have missed their formative school years; we thus provide children’s books in their mother tongue, often with side-by-side translation into English, which they can read with their parents and library staff who have the language skills to read with them.

In recognition of the importance of indigenous languages, also mentioned by the IFLA, we also address the struggle of Kurmanji speaking adults, many of whom have been prohibited from learning to read and write in their mother tongue (Ibrahim 2017). Thanks to a volunteer, we have a selection of books in Kurmanji, and host a Kurdish teacher who shares these resources with his pupils within the library. In this way, we ‘allocate our resources for the preservation of cultural expression and heritage’ (IFLA/UNESCO 2008).

Facilitating intercultural dialogue

Through offering a multi-lingual request system, we attempt to facilitate ‘access to a broad range of materials and services reflecting all communities and needs’ (IFLA/UNESCO 2008). Some of the most popular resources that we supply are language learning resources into Greek, English and German. We print and distribute basic language guides which offer translations of key vocabulary, including medical language and phrases to express basic needs. We have so far distributed over 10,000 of these, as well as enabling library users to download language learning apps onto their phones through our mobile WiFi unit. These are an essential ‘newcomer resource’ (IFLA/UNESCO 2008); we see dramatic spikes in the request of and distribution of these resources whenever more residents are moved into the camps that we work in.

It is essential to note that in this context, the languages of Greek and English are survival tools. Refugees and migrants are rendered mute by the state they are resettling in if they do not simultaneously learn to communicate in the hegemonic languages of the region (Spivak and Butler 2007, 59). For example, one woman living in a camp that we visit gave birth without medical assistance because there was nobody to translate for her and the camp residents could not communicate with emergency staff. Her baby suffered defects. Despite this, language learning is not provided for by those who run the camps, nor is it facilitated by the geographical segregation of the camp setting. ECHO is therefore committed to actively work to combat gatekeeping to language learning practised by the state (Gardner-Chloros, Gonoas and McEntee-Atalianis, 2016) by maximising access to language resources for those who need it.

Once again we find that practising multiculturalism in this context sheds light on systemic injustice at the borders of Europe. The dynamic between the mother tongue languages spoken by our library users and the languages they want to learn is coded in international power relations. Upon being offered a Farsi book, one library user, Abdullah, replies “Farsi no good. Me need English. Farsi - Inglisi - then me go London like you get job”. When Abdullah dismisses his mother tongue as ‘no good’ and instead implores ‘me need English’, he is making a pertinent statement on the utility and power of the various languages he comes into contact with. In order to access jobs, stability, a future, he needs the languages of power: Greek and English. As we navigate this nexus of language and power, our responsibility as librarians is paramount: we must resist capitulating to the greater epistemic injustice that those speaking minority languages face (Fricker, 2007). This is reflected in much of the IFLA’s 2008 call to centre both minority languages and the needs of refugee groups in good multicultural practice (IFLA/UNESCO 2008). What is missing here is a reflection of the global power structures that inform this need. ECHO’s case once again calls attention to the duty to inform our multicultural practice with our experience of systemic and life-threatening inequities. As such, we must be wary of celebrating the hierarchies and structures reproduced in the language-learning expectation imposed on refugees. Nevertheless, we recognise the essential nature of providing language learning resources and strive to offer this service in a way that meets the needs of those we serve.

Working as a diverse and integrated part of the community

The IFLA’s recognises that it is essential to ‘employ staff to reflect the diversity of the community, who are trained to work with and serve diverse communities’. Unfortunately, ECHO is not in a financial position to employ anyone; we are an entirely volunteer-run organisation. Our two co-ordinators receive an accommodation and food stipend to ensure retention of skills, which is vital given the mutability of all other aspects of our operation. As such, we are indebted to the work that our volunteers do; our sessions are run collaboratively with the communities that we serve, often with ad hoc interpreters helping us during a session. Sometimes residents opt to become official volunteers, attending each session and making loans. Accordingly, our team does ‘reflect the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the community to ensure cultural awareness, reflect the community the library serves, and encourage communication’. This model is a lynch-pin of ECHO’s multicultural practice, as it allows us to get the resources to people who need them and foster inter-cultural dialogue within the communities we serve.

We facilitate this diverse staffing model by maintaining an understanding of the barriers that volunteers from refugee backgrounds face while taking part. We adapt our rules about attendance and punctuality for volunteers in an unstable position, and relax our standard two-

month commitment policy which is applied to other volunteers. This is because we respect that many refugees cannot make this commitment, but have invaluable language skills and experience of the settings in which we operate. Furthermore, in our most recent drive for funding we are prioritising funds to be able to pay our interpreters and teachers a living wage for the work that they do. This will support them and enable them to continue working with the library. In this way we can see that the effective practice of multicultural policies does not disregard but rather attends to cultural diversity, and the differentiated access to resources and security that these are associated with.



The team at Malakasa camp. 2019

Facilitating intercultural dialogue

ECHO for Refugees always aims to remain a neutral space that facilitates intercultural dialogue. We fully support the IFLA's statement that '(r)espect for the diversity of cultures, tolerance, dialogue and cooperation, in a climate of mutual trust and understanding are among the best guarantees of international peace and security' and that all libraries should 'work for cross-cultural dialogue and active citizenship' (2008). This becomes particularly pertinent in locations where there is conflict and fighting between groups. For example, in late 2018 we were forced to suspend library sessions for two weeks when fighting between Syrian/Kurdish and Afghani speakers in Malakasa Camp escalated to stabbings. Two residents lost their lives. In camps which lack stability and security, our library functions as an unusually neutral space, where there are materials available to all. We try to have team members with language skills

appropriate to all groups present, and to seek out and welcome in underrepresented groups. We also pay close attention to where we park the van, seeking out spots that are in widely accessible, neutral areas.

However, the lens of multiculturalism allows the source of these tensions to fall out of shot; on the whole, residents are moved in with limited knowledge of their surroundings and their futurity. Even camp authorities frequently appear unprepared for new arrivals, housing them in tents for long periods of time rather than more appropriate living spaces. Resources are scarce and often their methods of distribution remain mystified for those receiving them, allowing rumours of ethnic favouritism to arise. Through our experience it is these circumstances of deprivation and a lack of transparency, *not* inherent difference, that produce high tension between people from different ethnic and national backgrounds and limits opportunities for community building amongst the residents. Our role as a cite for intercultural dialogue has to be attentive to this; we try to avoid distribution tensions by refusing to distribute any donation through any other system than our loans system. We are often given coats, toys and children's shoes by other grassroots organisations in Athens wishing to use us a transport mechanism to the hard-to-reach camps. We ensure to give these to agents experienced in distribution who can do so without causing conflict. Thus we find that in the case of ECHO, it is understanding that inter-ethnic tensions are caused by poor conditions, lack of appropriate community building space, and scarce resources is essential when attempting to foster a multicultural library space.

ECHO is committed to raising awareness of the complex situation in Greek camps for refugees. Based on our experiences with the library we see that the hierarchies of power and language often mean that the flow of resources is simply a one-way conduit, re-entrenching the image of European groups and the cultural west as 'givers' and the passive role often assigned to migrants and refugees as 'receivers'. With the agency of the latter party so circumscribed, this forecloses anything that could be described as 'dialogue'. Meanwhile, the onus for assimilation and intercultural education falls on refugees and migrants, too often discussed as if it is them who pose a threat to multiculturalism. This reveals a total lack of awareness of, or conscious disregard for, the glaring reality that many refugees lived in much more diverse societies than the average European; Syria, despite its historic persecution of the Kurds, has been home to almost unrivalled ethnic and religious diversity for hundreds of years (Drysdale & Hinnebusch 1991, 222). As part of our conviction that successful intercultural dialogue must be reciprocal, the ECHO team has completed an advocacy tour in the UK, and taken part in newspaper and radio pieces in both Greek and UK news. We act as a vector for crosscultural information to flow, providing wider society with knowledge of the realities of Europe's border regime for those caught in limbo down its cracks.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have described one example of multicultural library practice through the case of our mobile library, ECHO for Refugees. We have done this in dialogue with the IFLA/UNESCO's Manifesto for Multicultural libraries (2008). What has emerged from this case study is an acute need to push our defined goal of multiculturalism further: for ECHO in Athens multicultural practice requires an understanding of the structures of inequality precipitated by the European border regime. It appears that, in this context, it is vital to understand not only that there are multiple cultures mixing, but why people are here and how they are treated.

Working in the city of Athens which we love, but whose deplorable conditions for migrants and refugees dwelling on the periphery of Europe we hate, we call upon librarians and those who work as purveyors of knowledge to consider their role in this changing, hopeful, horribly unequal world. Currently there are 13,000 migrant children detained on the US border (New York Times 2019). 80,000 men, women and children are detained in Libya, some of them in EU funded centres (Middle East Monitor 2019). The climate is continuing to breakdown, and by 2060, there could be between 25 million and 1 billion environmental migrants (IOM 2019). As the Witt and Smith reminded us at the beginning of 2019, libraries can respond to the call for justice in an unjust world (*ibid*: 8). As custodians of community building, knowledge, and memory, we must hear the call of this unequal world; it calls us to facilitate strong integrated, multicultural communities; it calls us to do more than just inclusion and diversity; it calls us to oppose and dismantle global apartheid. Love books, hate borders.



A woman shouts in protest at the border, 2016

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