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Hope through Archive: Refugee Youths' Counterstories in the Ritsona Kingdom Journal

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Abstract: Amidst a harsh increase in anti-refugee sentiments and policies in 2017, teen and young adult residents of Ritsona refugee camp outside of Athens, Greece launched a digital magazine called the Ritsona Kingdom Journal (RKJ) to share their perspectives, hopes, and frustrations with the world beyond the gates of the camp. This contribution, written by a volunteer facilitator who worked with youth on the RKJ in 2017, focuses retrospectively on how these refugee youth created their own archives of this time in their life. Throughout the duration of the RKJ's publication until 2019, the youth of Ritsona crafted counterstories against binaristic misconceptions of refugees as either pure victims or villains. These acts of prefigurative counterstorying and self-archiving are inherently hopeful, challenging both what constitutes archives in the first place, as well as the dominant anti-refugee paradigms of then and now, in order to imagine and enact alternative futures.

Keywords: hope, counterstory, archive, refugee youth, prefiguring, Ritsona Kingdom Journal

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Figure 1: "Sunrise over Ritsona" (Bashar, Sagvan, Abdul, Amar, Borkin, and Mohamed, "A Day in Ritsona" 38).

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From the Author: A Note on Form, Purpose, and Context

From July through December 2017, I (see Figure 2) volunteered as a facilitator in the Youth Engagement Space (YES; see Figure 5) run by a Swedish humanitarian organization called Lighthouse Relief, in Ritsona refugee camp (see Figure 1), outside of Athens, Greece. Opened a year earlier, in 2017 Ritsona housed 750 residents, half of whom were children (Latonero, Pool, and Berens 16), and the majority of whom were Syrian or Iraqi (Farhat et al.). In the YES, I worked with youth on numerous creative projects and activities, including the *Ritsona Kingdom Journal (RKJ).* As Lighthouse Relief explains on the landing page for the now-archived *RKJ,* "In spring 2017, young people in Ritsona came to us with a bold proposal: launch a publication that was proudly and unambiguously their own." Published from 2017 to 2019, the *RKJ* featured art, writing, and photography produced as part of YES creative workshops, as well as "everything from letters to global readers, essays on displacement, original photography of daily life in Ritsona, and many pieces of thoughtful and powerful artwork" (Lighthouse Relief).

This contribution to the Cluster Conversation is both *about* the *RKJ,* and stylistically modeled *after* the *RKJ, i*n an intentional attempt to amplify not only its contents, but also its form. Rather than a singular article-type essay, this contribution mimics the form of a multimodal digital magazine, with photography by youth from the *RKJ* interspersed with short original essays. My aim is to illustrate how the youth of Ritsona used the *RKJ* as an archive of their own voices in the discourses surrounding them, creating through the *RKJ* alternative narratives, paradigms, and ways of being beyond the narrow frameworks that seek to position refugees as victims or villains, and that posit war and hatred as the only realities.

Figure 2: The Author in the YES (Youth Ritsona, "YES Workshops" 12).

Leave Signs: Hope in the Archives

Outrider poet Anne Waldman meditates on the power of archive as a feminist and activist practice: "through Archive we show humanity…the consciousness of the future…we were not just slaughtering one another." An archive is where we "leave signs," to draw on Clarke, of struggle, triumph, and alternative ways of living and being (48). Taking these ideas together, our work in uncovering and crafting archives can be not only a sign to the future that we lived our lives differently than the majoritarian narrative of devastation, but can also *create* a future full of alternative ways (other than war, hatred, and greed) of relating to one another, an ultimately hopeful future.

However, in order to achieve this potential of archive, our definitions of what constitutes "archive" need to shift as well. Gaillet and Rose define archives in part as "collections of materials related to a person, family, or organization that have continuous social and cultural value" (125). This common definition raises questions around who decides "social and cultural value," when, how, and why. As Shipka notes, archives determine theory, but theoretical values also determine what gets archived. Glenn and Enoch propose a reorientation of focus towards "lower-case-*a* archives," through which we can expand our understanding of *what* can be considered an archive, and *who* can be considered a curator (17). For example, Basinski redefines the role of curators to be "involved with the manifesting and facilitating of new forms, otherworldly forms" (58). This focus on manifestation is in conversation with Tuhiwai Smith's argument that by honoring alternative histories and prioritizing alternative knowledges, we can "form the basis of alternative ways of doing things" (36). This is an inherently hopeful view of archive(s) – that by challenging what is included in/as archive(s), we are not only leaving signs of our hopes for the future, but also actively creating that better future. It is exactly this hopeful work of prefiguring a different future that I argue the youth of Ritsona enact through the *RKJ* as an example of a lower-case-*a* archive of their dreams (see Figure 3), frustrations, and realities while living in Ritsona.

Figure 3: The "Dreaming is Free" mural (Youth Ritsona, "Dreaming is Free" 1).

Redefining Refugee": Counterstories Against Anti-Refugee Rhetorics

The realities that the youth of Ritsona were dealing with in 2017 were fraught on a number of levels, from the material waiting game of asylum claims, to the harsh global responses to the rapid increase of forcibly displaced persons around the world. Global political events like Brexit, the U.S. Muslim Bans, and the EU-Turkey Deal both reinforced, and were themselves in reaction to, anti-refugee attitudes and rhetorics. These policies, as Gotlib notes, have real life or death consequences for refugees, yet, as McDonald points out, their own perspectives are so rarely heard or respected on these issues. This dynamic suggests that even those individuals or institutions that are seemingly "pro"-refugees can still inflict harm, intentional or not, by positioning refugees, "as a problem and the sponsor [those working alongside refugees] as a solution" (MacDonald 39). This framing hints at other binaristic labels that are imposed on refugees, such as "victim/savage, suspicious/silent, and fearsome/invisible" (MacDonald 46).

When I arrived at Ritsona in the summer of 2017, the YES was in the midst of a powerful project for the *RKJ* called "Redefining Refugee" (see Figure 4), in which youth wrote their own definitions of "refugee," on t-shirts with paint markers. The YES program facilitators explain that this project "was born of a desire for youth to express their voices and claim ownership of labels that they have been assigned" (Youth

Ritsona, "Redefining Refugee" 5). This focus on reclamation is in close conversation with counterstory, which Martinez describes as a way for "minoritized people to intervene in research methods that would form 'master narratives' based on ignorance and assumptions about minoritized people" (21). I see the "Redefining Refugee" project as one way in which the youth of Ritsona crafted counterstories for and in the *RKJ* to push back against anti-refugee rhetorics.

All shirts in the spread speak directly or indirectly to misconceptions about refugees, including, "We aren't your enemy" (Youth Ritsona, "Redefining Refugee" 5). Another reads, "Put yourself in my place. Be stateless. No land. No stability. No safety. Then judge me" (Youth Ritsona, "Redefining Refugee" 5). One resists victim narratives by writing, "We are Syrian but we have humanity, and I don't need anyone to look down on us," while others share mantras such as, "Don't give up and be confident in yourself" (Youth Ritsona, "Redefining Refugee" 6). There are numerous calls to shared humanity, rejecting the dehumanizing discourse surrounding refugees, including one t-shirt that reads, "Where is the humanity? I am not only a refugee. I am human." (Youth Ritsona, "Redefining Refugee" 5). Some youth spoke to the concept of being "normal," explaining that a refugee is, "a normal person who gives smiles and hope to the world" (Youth Ritsona, "Redefining Refugee" 6). These (re)definitions represent counterstories against the victim/villain binary, for audiences of both the youth themselves, and a broader, global public, through publication in the *RKJ*.

Looking at the "Redefining Refugee" project as a small cross-section of the *RKJ*, it is clear that youth were incredibly aware of the pervasive discourses that portray refugees as either dangerous or helpless, as villains or victims. Through this project, youth actively created an archive that proposed alternative narratives, paradigms, and ultimately ways of living beyond hatred, death, and destruction. In other words, this project was youths' way of recovering, prioritizing, and curating *their own voices* against a global discourse that sought to silence them or put them into narrow boxes with inaccurate labels. Since many of the challenges of 2017 are still present and prevalent in the lives of refugees, the Redefining Refugee project, as a lower-case-*a* archive, remains a powerful reminder to global audiences to attune to and center the voices of refugee youth in the issues that impact them the most.

Figure 4: Example shirts from the "Redefining Refugee" project (Youth Ritsona, "Redefining Refugee" 6).

Hope, Revisited: The Ritsona Kingdom Journal's Impact

YES founder Daphne Morgen has shared that the magazine helped youth "have some control over the information being produced about them. In a world where they have very little control over their circumstances, this can be powerful" (Keung). These sentiments are echoed by youth creators themselves; one youth I knew in Ritsona, Michael, explains, "You can't do anything here….When you have nothing to do, painting helps. I take my paints out and I can explain things" (King). The need to create and to share these creations is further clarified by Michael's older brother George, sharing, "We created the magazine because we wanted to tell people that we are here and that we are people with many talents" (King). Furthermore, another teen I knew in Ritsona, Borkin, explains, "I want to capture everyday life in the camp and of all my friends. I want people outside to see how we live here" (King). In their own words, young people in Ritsona sought not only creative expression, but also a global audience for their work. It is exactly through this global audience that the *RKJ* can continue to make an impact, even after its publication has ceased.

Looking back at the *RKJ* seven years since it started, it is clear to me that it was an act of curation and archive on the part of its youth creators, an inherently hopeful act of cataloging both their daily life for readers living beyond the confines of Ritsona camp, and for expressing their aspirations and frustrations through creative outlets. By sharing counterstories in the *RKJ* against the prevalent victim/villain binaristic

misconception of refugees, youth rewrote the narratives surrounding their lives. By reorienting the conversation towards shared humanity, youth prefigured a different, better future, a future enacted on a daily basis in the YES and through the *RKJ*. To return to Tuhiwai Smith, I see the youth of Ritsona, through the *RKJ,* as producing alternative histories of this fraught time, which remind global viewers of different ways of being and doing. For these readers of the *RKJ*, even all these years later, may we take the lessons offered by the youth and honor them in our own archives, our own memories, and our own acts of prefiguring alternative futures.

Figure 5: The YES circa 2017 (Youth Ritsona, *Ritsona Kingdom Journal* 40).

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