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Applied Theatre as a Co-Creative Methodology for More Convivial Knowledge Production in Refugee-Receiving Communities

Marieke van Houte [1] and Maria Charlotte Rast [2]

[1] Department for Anthropology and Development Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands
[2] Department of Sociology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Marieke van Houte (marieke.vanhoute@ru.nl)

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Abstract

This article explores, based on hands-on experience, how applied theatre may serve as a co-creative mutually and actively negotiated—convivial—method of knowledge production in refugee-receiving societies. In this article, we argue that it only makes sense to conceptually understand relational processes of how we manage to live together, and interrogate structural mechanisms of exclusion, if we also embrace a move towards relational and mutually and actively negotiated—in short, convivial—methods of knowledge production (cf. Merlín-Escorza, 2024). However, despite increased interest, examples of methodological innovations and instructions on the how of co-creative knowledge production "are more difficult to locate" (Shea, 2024, p. 2). Based on an applied theatre and research project, we discuss three distinct processes through which we think applied theatre can serve as a convivial co-creative method. We make a case for creating and holding space for embodied, relational, negotiated knowledges to emerge and discuss conditions that can facilitate this.

Keywords

applied theatre; co-creative methods; conviviality; migrants; refugees

1. Introduction

The exclusion of marginalized groups is not simply caused by individual characteristics of marginalized people but rather by exclusionary structural mechanisms, normalized discourses and images, and power relationships (Ghorashi, 2014). Addressing exclusion thus requires making exclusionary structures more

receptive and adaptive (Varga, 2015) instead of expecting marginalized people to adjust to existing (exclusionary) structures.

One of the most paradoxical structural mechanisms of societal exclusion is that in research on societal exclusion, marginalized people's knowledges are often either *excluded* from dominant frameworks of (academic) knowledge production and thus neglected in the search for solutions (Anderson, 2012; Medina, 2013), or this knowledge is *extracted* as "raw materials" (Merlín-Escorza, 2024, p. 281) from them in ways that are harmful and misrepresent their experiences, knowledges, and claims (Davids et al., 2024; Merlín-Escorza, 2024; Shea, 2024). Through exclusion and/or extraction, this work tends to: (a) reproduce structural mechanisms of exclusion, (b) overemphasize the disadvantaged position of excluded individuals while neglecting their skills, ambitions, and the plurality of their experiences (Ghorashi, 2014), and (c) reinforce (implicit) hierarchical relationships between "powerful" researchers "giving voice" to "powerless" migrants (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020).

The question thus emerges of how to create transformative knowledge that challenges exclusionary structures, images, and relations, and that honours and incorporates "the deep theorizing and analysis already taking place within communities that reside outside of academia" (Shea, 2024, p. 2) instead. In this article, we argue that it only makes sense to conceptually understand relational processes of how we live together if we also embrace a move towards relational and mutually and actively negotiated—in short, convivial—methods of knowledge production (cf Merlín-Escorza, 2024). The concept of conviviality is about the "capacity to live together" and builds on concepts of reciprocity, solidarity, and community as social processes that are "actively produced through social practices, often in the face of change and conflict" (Wise & Noble, 2016, p. 424).

Critique of the so-called "convivial turn" warns of a "descriptive naivety" (Valluvan, 2016, p. 205) that merely describes "happy-clappy" (Wise & Noble, 2016, p. 425) ways of living together across lines of difference. Hence we insist on a critical interpretation of conviviality, which recognizes structural relations and categorizations of inequality, including racism, and the effort it takes for people to "live together and care about each other against the odds" (de Noronha, 2022, p. 160), while actively *refusing* racist and nationalist notions of difference (de Noronha, 2022) and the normative (politics) of belonging and identity (Valluvan, 2016). As such, a critical conceptualization of conviviality brings the notion of negotiation, friction, and sometimes conflict, in which community and belonging is not a given but a *practice* of hard labour for all its members (Wise & Noble, 2016).

Despite an increased interest, examples of methodological innovations and instructions on *how* co-creative approaches to knowledge production "are more difficult to locate" (Shea, 2024). Responding to this gap in the "how" of co-creative knowledge production, in this article we will reflect on a co-creative participatory theatre and research project called the Extraordinary Queuing Experience (EQE), as part of a wider public outreach project on migration called Contained Project. We explore the practices, challenges, and opportunities of this particular form of co-creative research by answering the question: How can applied theatre serve as a co-creative convivial research methodology to co-create knowledge on living together in refugee-receiving societies?

We will argue that co-creative convivial ways of producing knowledge are less about the particular questions we ask or the particular co-creative format to spark dialogue. Rather, it is about creating and holding space

for participants to feel sufficiently safe and challenged to put in the work of producing and negotiating knowledge on what it is like to live together. We argue that when putting in this work, differences do not have to lead to antagonistic relationships that need to be eliminated, managed, exoticized, or made the basis for marginalization, but rather they can be a source of creativity and the basis for a better shared world (Kaptani et al., 2021; Venkatesan et al., 2024).

In what follows, we will conceptually and methodologically set the stage for this work. Then, we will discuss three distinct processes through which we think applied theatre can serve as a convivial co-creative method. In the conclusion, we will make a case for convivial knowledge co-creation as a means to create and hold space for embodied, relational, negotiated knowledge to emerge.

2. Co-Creative and Convivial Research Approaches to Living Together in Refugee-Receiving Societies

Co-production of knowledge can be defined as "a process of mutually articulating, refining, and amplifying valued knowledge and practices with community partners to strengthen learning environments locally and influence theory, teaching, and policy more broadly" (Shea, 2024, p. 1). Such approaches "develop…more equitable partnerships rooted in community values and knowledge" and are, moreover, "contextual and relational, responding to the desires of community partners and the contours of local practice" (Shea, 2024, p. 2; cf. Gattenhof et al., 2021).

Co-creative research approaches may prioritize the process of creating and holding a space (cf. Pascoe et al., 2020) in which people who are most affected by an issue take a central role as relevant holders and co-creators of knowledge (Lenette, 2019). This enables the emergence of a diversity of voices, perspectives, and experiences (Gattenhof et al., 2021), including perspectives that can potentially challenge taken-for-granted understandings (Lenette, 2019). The term "holding space" is a relatively underexplored concept in academic literature but is commonly used in group and community work that involves vulnerabilities, where it may be defined as "being present, compassionate, and supportive of someone without trying to fix or change them or their circumstances" (Centre for Holding Space, n.d.). This relates to Ghorashi and Ponzoni's (2014) concept of interspace, where people take time to temporarily suspend their own taken-for-granted positions and truly listen to "the other." By establishing in-between and held spaces where participants, researchers, and different audiences take the time to be present, compassionate, and supportive, they can share, reflect on, challenge and better understand each other's positionings and perspectives, while enabling, but not enforcing, any form of transformation. As such, co-creative forms of knowledge production can contribute to people relating to each other in new ways and co-creating more inclusive and transformative knowledge.

Applied art forms, including applied performative arts, are increasingly recognized as tools for co-creative knowledge production (Leavy, 2020). Performance and theatre in general have long been recognized as relevant to understanding social interaction, as theatre can be viewed as a metaphor for social life itself (Bune, 2023). However, theatre as performance may also contribute to victimizing, stigmatizing, and "othering" marginalized people in a "spectacle of suffering" that fixes the (victim) subject and the (non-victim) witness in essentialized frames, without making a clear contribution to social change (Balfour, 2011). Applied theatre (also called "participatory theatre"), on the other hand, may be defined as performative art forms that

seek to engage audiences as participants while explicitly creating an active space for storytelling, healing, teaching, and learning, and, through these processes, social change and personal transformation (Dennis, 2009; Shaughnessy, 2012; Taylor, 2003).

Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO; see Boal, 1979/2019) is a highly influential example of applied theatre that is used in social work settings globally. The methodology is designed to invite groups of participants with a shared experience of oppression to explore and make visible power inequalities and injustices and try out ways to challenge them, considering the theatre floor as a rehearsal space for the real world (Bune, 2023; Erel et al., 2017). The methodology consists of an arsenal of games, exercises, and theatrical formats that can be adapted to the needs of the specific group (Boal, 2002). Over the years, a small number of researchers have applied the methodology as an ethnographic or participatory action research method (Bune, 2023; Erel et al., 2017; Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008).

In addition to its inherent transformative power, TO as a research method constitutes a move towards co-created and convivial knowledge production, as the methodology offers tools for building a community in which participants can safely explore, share, and analyze experiences—even if they are covered in taboo and trauma (Davids et al., 2024; Erel et al., 2017). Participants do not need to share their own stories but rather reflect on the fictional images and stories created on the theatre floor—which creates a safe emotional distance to discuss sensitive topics. The role of the facilitator is to strike a balance between supporting and provoking participants and pay attention to the relationship between the personal and the societal dimensions of the work. As such, the methodology creates space for knowledge that has been denied agency and voice and creates space to imagine alternatives to the status quo (Bune, 2023; Österlind, 2008).

There are also caveats to the application of TO in our search for a co-creative convivial research approach. To not reify mechanisms of exclusion such as categorization and essentialization of migrant identities, we wanted to include but not isolate migrants in the research population (Dahinden, 2016), and we wanted to create space to elicit diverse experiences, not focusing on oppression. Boal (2002) originally designed the TO methodology for small homogeneous groups. When used in groups with mixed experiences and power positions, the focus on oppression may elicit "moves to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012) by participants in more privileged positions by negating the issues or assuming a position of the oppressed, thereby contributing to silencing and further oppression rather than solutions (Hamel, 2013). Hence, we sought an adaptation to the original TO methodology that offers space for relationality between diverse positionalities and experiences, and found it in applied improvised and physical theatre.

Improvised theatre is a form of theatre in which the actors do not know in advance what role(s) they will play. Improv actors train to be actively present in the moment, accept and adapt to the situation, and not judge their fellow actors for their choices (Drinko, 2018). Applied improvised theatre practitioners recognize these things as crucial life skills and conditions for creativity and use these basic principles and techniques "to foster the growth and/or development of flexible structures, new mindsets, and a range of inter and intra-personal skills required in today's volatile and uncertain world" (Dudeck & McClure, 2018). When used in applied settings, improv principles are meant to slightly put people out of their comfort zone, unsettle fixed perspectives, induce laughter, and rewire the brain (Drinko, 2013). Physical theatre is characterized by forms of performance that do not take text but rather the movement of physical bodies as its starting point,

and may as such be seen as a space where hegemonic, rational/word-based forms of expression, knowledge, and power may be subverted or questioned. This gives space to acknowledge the body in relationship to the socio-political, cultural-historical, and symbolic context as a source of knowledge (Coetzee & Munro, 2010). Although the field of applied improvisation and physical theatre is a lively community of practice, to the best of our knowledge it has not yet been reported as being used as a research methodology in the social sciences.

It is the combination of this acknowledgement of the body and movement as a source of knowledge, the liberating, unsettling qualities of applied improv, and the dedication to creating a safe and inviting rehearsal and performance space for TO that formed the groundwork for our own methodology and aim to explore how applied theatre can serve as a co-creative convivial research methodology.

3. Methodology

The Extraordinary Queuing Experience, an applied theatre and research project, provides the empirical basis for this article. EQE was reproduced several times with different teams in the UK, Belgium, and the Netherlands between 2015 and 2017 as part of a wider public outreach initiative on migration Contained Project. Situated during and right after the "asylum system crisis" (Larruina, 2023), the EQE explored the question of how it feels to arrive somewhere unfamiliar, where the rules are unknown, what challenges and strategies people face, and which "gatekeepers" and allies have an influence on that.

The project resulted from a combination of a slowly growing awareness of the limits of conventional migration research, first author Marieke's expanding training and hands-on experience with performative techniques, including a long-standing practice of improv theatre, a professional training in the TO methodology and some training in physical theatre (cf. Davids et al., 2024), ad hoc opportunities to create and perform in various settings, similarly ad hoc means of (very limited) funding and a lot of free labour and passion by all team members including the authors.

The first two production rounds were developed and performed by teams of semi-professional or professional actors, many with migration experience but all well-established in their current communities. The third production took place in Amsterdam with a team with recent and less recent refugee and other migration backgrounds as well as native Dutch, both semi-professionals and non-actors. It proved to be very useful to have tried out the methodology with (semi-)professional and established actors, before doing this with a diverse and multilingual group with diverging vulnerabilities. Each production round had both an internal rehearsal process and an external performance process. In the remainder of this article, we will mainly refer to the most diverse group of the "Amsterdam" production round.

After being asked to do a performative intervention with participants of a charity walk for Stichting Vluchteling (The Refugee Foundation), Marieke, supported by second author Maria, sought collaboration with the community initiative BOOST, a local initiative that was set up to promote contact and integration between newcomers and local Amsterdammers. Marieke spent a few weeks "hanging out" to introduce the idea of jointly creating a performance through flyers, announcements during the shared lunchtime, Facebook, and meet and greet sessions.

The first rehearsal session was optional, after which we asked participants if they wanted to commit to the full production. Eventually, the team consisted of 19 people, including 14 actors, two photographers, two filmmakers, and a facilitator, plus a colleague collecting audience reflections after the performance. Seven participants had arrived in the Netherlands recently (less than three years ago), six participants moved to the Netherlands between five and 30 years ago, and six were born in the Netherlands. Many, but not all, of the participants were also either volunteers or beneficiaries in the BOOST community centre. Marieke acted as a facilitator of the rehearsal sessions, supported by a co-facilitator who was also an actor. Maria was one of the participants of the project and was also involved at BOOST as a student volunteer who conducted qualitative research for her MA and PhD on the dynamics within this community initiative. Maria contributed to the co-analysis and writing, and conducted reflective interviews with some of the participants.

Before the start and throughout the process, Marieke made it clear that the process served a triple goal. The first was to bring people of different backgrounds together to share, connect, and have fun, which, in the words of Wright et al. (2021), is the basis for a "practice of care, as an inclusive relational ethic for research." The second goal was to give audiences an experience of what it feels like to be a migrant in order to spark dialogues. The third goal was to generate research insights into this method as a way of co-creating knowledge on mechanisms of migration and living together.

The internal process consisted of a series of six workshop-rehearsal sessions and had three components: (a) physical and associative exercises from TO, physical theatre and improv, which elicited pieces of story, emotion and action that participants chose to share about their thoughts on, and personal experience of, the theme; (b) improvisations on emerging themes and topics through image building and improvised scenes; and (c) rehearsing the script that Marieke wrote based on the themes, improvisations, and reflections that emerged during the rehearsals. We then carried out the resulting performance as an immersive and partly invisible theatrical performance, a theatrical format developed by Boal that is a small theatrical play in a place that is not a theatre, and for an audience that is not (aware of being) an audience (Boal, 2002), which we will discuss further in the next section.

Each exercise, improvisation, or scene that we performed was followed by collaborative reflections and analysis based on four questions: What did we do? How did it feel? What does it mean (for our collaborative research)? And what do we do next? (Stanfield, 2000). All of the rehearsal sessions and some of the introductory sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed in a logbook. The collaborative analysis, captured in the notes and the recordings, forms the basis for the analysis for this article.

Some parts of the rehearsals and the performances were also video-recorded. The group was always asked for its permission before recording started, and it was made clear that the audio- and video-recording carried out by the researcher was solely for the purpose of research. By contrast, participants gave their permission to professional photographers and filmmakers to record specific moments in the process that were explicitly meant for publication. Some reflections of audience members were also partly video- and audio-recorded.

4. Processes of Convivial Co-Creation Throughout the EQE

In this section, we first identify three distinct yet obviously overlapping processes through which the EQE contributed to a relational and convivial co-creation of knowledge in the internal workshop/rehearsal sessions,

where these processes were most clearly visible and probably had the deepest impact. Then, we will discuss how these three processes emerged in the external, performance part of the project.

4.1. From Reproducing Structural Exclusion to Creating a Shared Playing Field

The first process through which we aimed to contribute to relational and convivial co-creation of knowledge was creating a shared playing field where people of diverse backgrounds, with the aspirations and/or skills to perform, would come together. We gratefully built this playing field within the lively BOOST community centre where many participants felt safe and at home. Next, instead of focusing on what they, *some deficient "others,"* lack (Ghorashi, 2014), the aim of this project was to play with what *we*, *as a group*, enjoyed and felt good about, thereby including and not isolating migrants. This is in line with Wright et al. (2021), who argue that a crucial element in relational inclusive co-creative research practice is creating a space for "emotional energies" such as fun and pride. Having fun in research, they argue, constitutes crucial evidence of relationships in the making, and the strengthening of groups' social cohesion (Wright et al., 2021). Reza later reflected:

> Yeah, I saw the energy between people who want to do well….Some days I was really tired. But I just wanted to go…and in that moment you really don't feel tired but you get energy from the atmosphere, from the other people and, uh, you really live in that moment. (Reza, Farsi/English, photographer; for each quoted participant, we indicate a pseudonym, main language proficiency, and role in the EQE)

Reza stressed that he wanted to participate in rehearsals even if he was tired. The concrete performance date created an interdependency, urgency, and focus to come to the rehearsals and we also expressed our expectation that team members who committed to the project would come to all rehearsals because of this interdependency. Compared to other activities at BOOST, our project seemed to stand out as all participants remained committed until the end instead of the better-known development of attendance rates slowly decreasing. The EQE furthermore constituted a co-created space in which all participants, no matter what their backgrounds were, could bring in, experiment with, and develop their skills and aspirations. Participants appreciated the fact that they were not recruited because they were refugees but for their skills and aspirations, and that we were forming a team of professionals and amateurs with migrant, refugee, and non-migrant backgrounds. Reza reflected on how he experienced the project as follows:

> I never did theatre or performance and, eeh, that was very exciting for me. I did it with my heart, I mean I just really wanted to do well and I felt really good that I could contribute something to this project. And it was personal development and I did not know that I [could] do photography or use my pictures in social media and….I also participated as an actor but I never thought, in my I life, [that] I [could] do theatre or play a role. I found it very exciting. And I felt really good, I could see another Reza, another perspective on myself….For example, later during a meeting at my work, I could say that I can take photos at very large events with 500 people. That was the beginning, it all started with Contained and with this project, that is ideal. So that's why I say that self-development is important for me. (Reza, Farsi/English, photographer)

Reza mentions that the project created space for his personal and professional development. Four other participants, who were professional actors, photographers, or filmmakers in their country of origin and had recently arrived in the Netherlands, mentioned that this project was a way of building their portfolio in the

Netherlands. Other motivations to join included meeting new people and trying out new things, having something to do to relax and not worry, and redirecting a sense of frustration and a sense of injustice.

Another important aspect of creating this playing field is language: In most other spaces where our participants with a refugee background interacted with Dutch locals, Dutch would be the "goal language," the hegemonic standard all participants were encouraged to aim at in order to be able to integrate into society. By contrast, in our project, where all participants relied on each other to develop a performance, group communication prevailed over improving individual language skills. In the introduction meetings, we always did a quick round of language skills: Thumbs up, down, or halfway would represent our language skills in each language. Asking the question "which language(s) do you speak?" instead of "where are you from?" was intentionally aimed at highlighting skills and plurality of belonging rather than highlighting and essentializing native–outsider constructions with the question "where are you (really) from?" (see Çankaya & Mepschen, 2019). We then made sure that everything we did was translated back and forth by fellow participants between the main shared languages, in our case Arabic, Farsi, English, and Dutch. There was definitely still a power dynamic based on language, as those who spoke more languages would inevitably understand and be able to communicate (at least in words) more, but instead of people with the most Dutch or English skills, it was now people who had the best *combination* of language skills that had an advantage. These were often those people with a migrant background. Moreover, these positions were dynamic: Not everyone could make it to all the rehearsals, so we decided every time anew who would be the translator for that rehearsal.

4.2. From Stereotypical Victimization to a Plurality of Mobile Experiences

The second process we identify in our quest for convivial co-created knowledge production is creating space for a plurality of voices and experiences rather than an overemphasis on victimization and marginalization. After the introductions, the first exercise of the first session was a sharing round, in which we asked participants to share in pairs with each other what "being on the move, going on a journey, arriving and reception" meant to them. The listener was then asked to summarize the story of their peer in one to three words and we would write those words on a flipchart. We also kept adding keywords throughout the process as they emerged. This led to the following list of words (associations with being on the move/making a journey/arriving/reception):

> Migration / family / Italy / curiosity /history /interest / curiosity / alertness / sensory simuli / luxury / home / cookies / journey / refugees / refugees / aeroplane / holiday / hotel / long green road / house / hope / starting over / emptiness / language / life course / hospitality / without a goal / with a goal / living / learning / leaving behind / relaxation / collaboration / alone / together / enduring /giving up / fighting / tension / competition / cooperate / follow / game / resistance / together / powerful / to work against / fast / first / last / connection / interesting / rhythm / cheerful / active / boring / stubborn / closure / (not) standing out / (in)visible / patience / waiting / dependent / (un)comfortable / beginning / trust / group / choice / responsibility / movement / moving house / e expand / helping / tired / power / energy / motivate / annoying / seasons / variety / safe / to take with / forward / abandoning / joining / game / agreement / strategy / attitude / fleeing / following / motivation / situation / feeling / thinking / group pressure / feminine / masculine

We then asked what this collection of words meant to us:

> Marieke [Dutch/English, facilitator]: So we have [repeats list of words]. What do you make of these words?
>
> Anna [Dutch/English, actor]: Positive!
>
> Marieke: So being on the move is also positive for many people. What else? What do you see in these words?
>
> Yasmine [Dutch/Farsi, actor]: Life!
>
> Marieke: Yes, being on the move is also part of life.
>
> Reza [Farsi/English, photographer]: All the life is being on the move.
>
> Jan [Dutch/English, co-facilitator and actor]: But also learning. What is that? Interests, history. And relaxation.
>
> Iris [Dutch/English, actor]: But there were four times "refugees," right? It's not just positive.
>
> Carla [Dutch/English/Italian, actor]: It's also leaving behind.
>
> Marieke: Yes, so leaving behind and going somewhere new.

This exercise revealed that participants had very diverse personal associations with migration and journeys, including insecurity and victimhood, but also adventure, excitement, strength, resistance, competition, collaboration, flexibility, creativity, and hope. The reflection that followed also showed different interpretations of the collection of words, portraying, as one might argue, equally diverse interpretations of the theme beyond the self.

This list of keywords was hanging in the rehearsal space and we kept coming back to it—to jointly decide which words we would want to explore through creating human images, using them for character building or improvisations.

In addition to the verbal associations, we also elicited a plurality of embodied attitudes towards being on the move through physical exercises, such as "leader and follower" (as adapted from a workshop called "Moving into political voice" by Arts for Action), a simple physical exercise that elicited a wealth of reflections:

> The exercise starts with all participants on one side, facing the same direction. One person, the leader, starts a movement and a sound, and everyone copies it. At some point, somebody crosses over to the other side, facing the group, and initiates a different movement and sound. All others may choose when they go to the other side—when everyone has crossed over, a new "leader" moves to the other side and initiates a new movement and sound. Then, participants are asked to do this a second time, whilst at the same time being mindful of what they observe, feel, and what that means.

After both rounds, as with any other exercise, Marieke asked what happened and how this felt. The participants burst into an engaging discussion about what they felt during the exercise: the need to collaborate, not wanting to give up, pride, confusion, tension, care, competition, curiosity, stubbornness, patience, feeling exposed, trust, responsibility, dependency, power, and energy.

Marieke then asked participants to reflect on what this means: how this linked to the topic of our joint exploration, the theme of being on the move, thus linking the personal embodied experience to the wider societal issues (Österlind, 2008). The following is a brief excerpt from the discussion:

> Carla [Dutch/English/Italian, actor]: You're dependent on others. You may want to make your own choice, but those are also dependent on other people.

Yasmine [Dutch/Farsi, actor]: You don't have a lot to choose.

> Karim [Arabic/Dutch, filmmaker]: [It's about] seasons. If we have one season, it's not nice. If we have four seasons, it's nice.
>
> Marieke: Variety?
>
> Anna [Dutch/English, actor]: You don't want to leave people behind, [you want to] help them.
>
> Peter [Dutch/English, filmmaker]: It's not leaving behind, is it? You can take care of them from a distance.
>
> Hossein [Farsi, Dutch, actor and musician]: If you don't connect to the group, the group cannot close. You need to continue, if a person doesn't [follow].
>
> Leila [Arabic, English, actor]: In my opinion, everyone has responsibility over what they choose, it's your responsibility and no one else's.

The discussion went on like this for five pages of transcribed text in total. Although there is no space to analyse the entire conversation, what stands out here is that people took the space to portray their own positions and were very precise and nuanced about interpreting their own bodily reactions and what it means in terms of mobilities, while actively listening to other perspectives. Collectively, we analysed the complexity of what it means to take the decision to be on the move, based on these different voices. This reflects how people in co-creative research interact and negotiate knowledge in an "interspace" (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014), and confirms Bune's observation that in the theatre space, "experience is not only shared but challenged, negotiated, and contested in the friction with other [participants]," which can be viewed as a practice of agency (Bune, 2023, p. 56) and conviviality (Wise & Noble, 2016).

4.3. From Fixed Hierarchies to Dynamic and Embodied Relations

A third process we identify is the extent to which we were able to create a space to dismantle hierarchical relationships in the research process.

In the EQE rehearsal process, we used improv warm-up games, seemingly silly games meant to slightly put people out of their comfort zone, unsettle fixed perspectives, induce laughter, and rewire the brain (Drinko, 2013). After such warm-ups, we used physical theatre exercises in which hierarchical relations could be more explicitly "undone/rewired"—for example, in a game called *Gatekeeper*:

> The group is split in half: Members of Team A, the "border crossers," have to find ways to break through the barriers of Team B, the "gatekeepers," after which they switch roles. The teams try different strategies to break through the gatekeepers or resist the border crossers. Participants reflect with surprise on insights they get from taking a different perspective than their own, such as a feeling of responsibility to protect the border as a gatekeeper. The exercise also elicits embodied memories: Hossein [Farsi/Dutch, actor and musician] comes out very excited, with his eyes wide open and a tense body posture, shouting: "This is exactly the way I passed the Serbian border!" At the same time, Iris [Dutch/English, actor] comes out, with a similar body language, saying: "This is exactly how we resisted the military police during the Amsterdam squatters' riots in the 1980s!" They see and recognize each other's position and start to exchange experiences. Through their bodily knowledge they are able to connect in a way that is new to them; Iris is also a volunteer at the community centre and we have witnessed her take a clear teacher position, seeing it as her job to educate newcomer "students" about Dutch language, norms, and values.

The research of Maria within the community initiative BOOST revealed how easily exclusionary assumptions, structures, and relations can be reproduced, notwithstanding inclusive intentions of initiators and volunteers (Rast & Ghorashi, 2018). What we believe we witnessed in the theatre project, however, is that creating a space that intentionally unsettles fixed roles and perspectives, in this case through improvisations and games and physical exercises, created the grounds for feeling and recognizing (embodied) shared connections beyond differences in positionalities. This supports the argument that "emotions such as fun and pride can promulgate hierarchical power relations as well as transgress and transform them" (Wright et al., 2021).

There are also limitations to "undoing hierarchies" in this convivial co-created research space—firstly, because the researcher/facilitator did come in with a plan (to co-create a performance), a central theme (being on the move and arriving in a new place) and a format (the EQE). Moreover, she assumed the role of facilitator and director of the rehearsals, and co-author of the academic paper based on this work. As discussed in a different piece (Davids et al., 2024), part of this hierarchy can be further undone by ensuring co-creation in every step of the research cycle, including co-designing and co-authoring the output. Yet the facilitator has to establish the conditions for a convivial space in which everyone feels invited and safe to participate and contribute in the way that works for them. For that, the facilitator's role is to set conditions regarding how to take care of privacy, team building, a mentally logical build-up of the sessions, healthy time management, etcetera. Based on our lived experience, we argue that for the creation of a convivial space, a level of leadership is inevitable and even desirable.

More problematically, we also experienced the stickiness of structural inequalities permeating and shaping interpersonal interaction in a conflict between the two cameramen, as the vignette below shows:

> The EQE has two cameramen on board: Karim had a wedding photography and filming business in Syria before coming to the Netherlands. Peter is a Dutch documentary maker. The idea is that the

> two men film the process and the final performance, and produce a film about it together. But things are going not so smooth between them: a difference of opinion on the use of equipment and software lets Karim believe that Peter is not taking his skills and his equipment seriously, and is just using him to shoot footage, without recognizing his autonomy as a professional. Peter, for his part, feels that Karim is being stubborn; he just wants to make the best possible film, for which he is of course going to credit him. It is hard for both filmmakers to find a way of working together on an equal footing, as Peter's insistence on the highest quality of software and equipment affects Karim's sense of professionalism and dignity, which adds to a pile of experiences in the Netherlands based on racialized notions of inequality. Marieke tries to mediate this conflict by having a meeting with both filmmakers, in which Karim explains his discontent and Marieke tries to translate and amplify the words of Karim, explaining that he feels underestimated and disrespected as a professional, and the frustration of Peter [in] not feeling understood in his good intentions. A while later, Peter indicates that due to personal circumstances, he is not able to complete the film. Instead, Karim makes a short trailer with his own software and equipment.

The incident of the two filmmakers shows how easily hierarchical relations are reproduced in a space with inclusionary intentions, and how transformative co-creation entails negotiation, friction, and sometimes conflict, in which community and belonging is not a given but a *practice* of hard labour for all its members (Wise & Noble, 2016). This also means that not all conflicts can be solved. We also think that part of the reason for this was that the film team operated as a semi-autonomous team within the project, which meant that they were not completely operating within the equal playing field that we created. A lesson to be drawn from this is that the spaceholding should be more consistently applied throughout the project, but also that it is often not within the capacity of the facilitator to undo structural notions of inequality.

4.4. Performing Relationality and Diverse Experiences

The three distinct processes that we described in the internal sessions, namely creating a shared playing field, eliciting a plurality of mobile experiences, and stimulating embodied and dynamic relations, also transpired in the performance, which constituted both an output of the co-creative research and an additional layer of data collection. We describe the set-up of the performance in the vignette below:

> The unexpecting audience are participants of a charity walk—starting at midnight, their mind is set on walking 40 kilometres around Amsterdam to raise funds for Stichting Vluchteling (the Refugee Foundation). Two kilometres into the walk, they need to board a ferry to cross the river IJ. At the ferry landing, they unknowingly become "spect-actors"—immersed participants of a partly invisible and increasingly absurdist theatre performance.
>
> In phase one, the arriving audience is stopped by gatekeepers, in security vests representing authority but also clearly in character, which is visible through their big authorative gestures. They represent Leadership, Street Level Bureaucrats, the System, and Corruption—characters that we developed based on participants' improvisations. An Announcer with a megaphone says: "Welcome to the Extraordinary Queuing Experience. Of course, you all want to board the ferry as soon as possible but our boat is small and not everyone can be on it. So get in line, fill in the form and we hope you have a *brillic* time. For your own safety, always follow the *Klump*." We use these non-existing words to

represent the estrangement due to language and communication barriers. The gatekeepers hand out clipboards with forms containing ambiguous questions that are hard to answer. While these elements are all clearly part of a "show," there are also actors dressed up as walkers, representing a storyline and an attitude to being on the move as came forward from the rehearsals: Curiosity; the Group person; the Tourist; the Victim; Hope; and the Beast.

In phase two, the selection process starts. All participants are "requested to start *folliding* into the *brenacle*"—another non-existent concept. The gatekeepers move into the audience and check their "folliding" capacity and their answers on the form, and give red or green stickers. The characters in the audience show different strategies matching their attitude and storyline.

In phase three, the selection process comes to a climax: All people with a green sticker are requested to step forward. The different characters in the audience experience this in a different way: The Victim makes a mistake and needs to go to the back of the line. Curiosity speaks up about this injustice but gets punished herself. The Group Person starts a riot by chanting "let us through!" Hope finds a spectacular way in. The Beast escapes and breaks through by force. Both gatekeepers and audience are highly agitated. There is a sense of crisis and chaos. At that point, the Announcer breaks the performance and says: "Congratulations! You have just survived the Extraordinary Queuing experience. But what if this was real? What if getting in was a matter of life and death? A lot of what you have just been through is reality for us. We are from Iran, Italy, Syria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Afghanistan. We wanted to let you experience, in a playful way, a little bit of what we experienced on our journeys. Of course, you are all welcome on the ferry—please talk to our colleagues on the ferry for more information!" The audience laugh and applaud in relief and quickly board the ferry, where they meet a colleague who asks for their reflections. The total experience has taken 10–15 minutes and spanned the time it took the ferry to make the round trip and board new passengers.

The performance was a partly invisible play guided by clear TO principles: during the time we had—we wanted to be done once the ferry was back to avoid unnecessary delays in walkers' long journey—we made it very clear to the audience, through visible dramatic cues in the roles of the gatekeepers, that they were immersed in a performance, to make them feel safe, welcome, respected and entertained. At the same time, and despite audiences' realization that they were experiencing a performance, we provoked them by making them feel blocked in their real-life movements. The space we created was also intentionally messy, chaotic, unequally visible to everyone, and entailed an amount of waiting. As such, it represented some of the qualities of experiences of mobility. A few weeks after the performance, we reflected as a team on this:

Marieke [Dutch/English, facilitator]: What was the Extraordinary Queuing Experience about for you?

Amir [Dutch/Farsi, actor]: [translates for other Farsi speakers:] The Persians are saying that it was about refugees and the way in which refugees made their journey.

Hossein [Farsi/Dutch, actor, and musician]: The beauty about theatre is that you can express yourself. That you can bring the thing you have inside of you out. That thing that is hard to express with language.

> Marieke: So you can say with your body what you can't say with words?
>
> Reza [Farsi/English, photographer]: Exactly!
>
> Marieke: Beautiful. Anything else?
>
> Amir: The Arab side?
>
> [laughter]
>
> Karim [Arabic/Dutch, filmmaker]: We are doing something right. That is information through movement. It's not always in the news that refugees have a difficult time. Do you understand? That is writing, but this is movement, with theatre. And that makes it easier for Dutch people [to] understand. If I do something, it's better than reading something.

From our collective reflection, we concluded as a team that the performance gave people an embodied experience, rather than a written account, of refugees' journeys, making it easier to communicate a lived experience. Much to our own amazement, many audience members did indeed reflect on a simultaneity of real feelings of anxiety and the awareness of the performance being fiction at the same time. This is aptly discussed by one audience member: on the one hand, she reflected on her awareness of the fictitious element of the performance, and her experienced distance to the reality of migrants:

> You always know that it's a safe environment, I always process this information as if OK, they're playing a game to make a point, but you know I will never be able to feel the same way as a refugee feels, because I know from the start that it's a safe environment, so….I wasn't really feeling like it's the same type of experience. (Audience member, Amsterdam, June 2017)

In the same reflection she recognized, despite her own skepticism, her instinctive negotiation between submission to authority and determination, and how that created an embodied understanding of what drives migrants:

> It's something stupid that you do. You fill in a stupid form and they give you a stupid sticker, but they sort of make you feel that you have to do it, to get on the boat. So at some point I was like, there is no point, but they still make you do it….There is no alternative. You need to get on the boat. And that's the same for them. They are going on that journey and by the time they make it to the coast they gotta get on that boat, right? (Audience member, Amsterdam, June 2017)

By combining reality and fiction, we created a shared playing field, a relational space in which all "spect-actors" were exposed to the same situation—in this case, the will to cross the river and the power of the gatekeepers.

An added layer of provocation came from the "invisible" part of the performance, in which invisible actors in the audience played out the *plurality of mobile experiences*. For spect-actors, these individual storylines were experienced by one of "us," rather than "them," a perceived "other." Afterwards, audience members reflected on their instinctive reactions to what was happening to them and what they perceived as their fellow audience members:

> You just try to comply with the rules. You don't resist. You are focused on getting in. (Audience member, Amsterdam, June 2017)

These embodied reactions of spect-actors, all people who are actively supportive of refugees, were also noticed by the team members:

> Amir [Dutch/Farsi, actor]: Maybe that's my projection. Maybe it's in my head that people that are pro-refugee are automatically, implicitly, a bit more easy-going and a bit less "hello, let's go quick." That, I thought, that belongs to right-winged people.
>
> Marieke [Dutch/English, facilitator]: When it's about themselves, they're not so nice anymore?
>
> Amir: Maybe it's not abnormal but I thought it was weird to see that they could be so, just really angry…
>
> Iris [Dutch/English, actor]: They just wanted to get through. Even if they are pro-refugees, they just wanted to get through.
>
> Marieke: But that's the funny thing, you understand it's a game, but also a real experience.

The reflections from both audiences and team members on whether or not they had stepped up for injustice, complied with the system, or were pushing to get through did not necessarily show behaviour that they hoped or expected of themselves, or what others would expect of them. Although this audience of refugee supporters might expect themselves to be more altruistic, they also displayed individualism and opportunism. As such, fixed hierarchies between "us" and "them," "victims" and "saviours," were unsettled, in an—almost magical—in-between space between fiction and reality in which people opened up to different perspectives on themselves and others.

5. Discussion

> Marieke [Dutch/English, facilitator]: So we made people feel, a little bit, what it feels to be a refugee. Which message or which problem did we show?
>
> Leila [English/Arabic, actor]: It was double faced. We all played the fears. We are forcing people to try it again. For me it was the best thing that I gained from that play. Facing your fears is the best way to [get] over it. That's why from the beginning I agreed on that….If you do something like this, it's kind of your way to [get] over it.
>
> Marieke: To overcome?
>
> Leila: Yeah.
>
> Hossein [Farsi/Dutch, actor and musician]: Walking, tired, refugees. When you arrive at the border, you're a bit happy it's finally over, and then they say, you can't get through. You're walking so far and you get a bit of hope and only then you find out, you can't pass…

Marieke: So hope and despair at the border?

Hossein: Exactly.

Leila: It was funny because they have the choice to walk. And then they are being forced to wait for the boat. For refugees it was no choice, they were forced to walk across countries. And forced to get the boat to drown there.

[later]

Jan [Dutch/English, actor]: I'm not a refugee and I don't know what it's like to get to a country where you may or may not be allowed to enter. But for me it was very clearly about arriving somewhere where you have certain expectations, and it turns out that's totally not the situation. You arrive somewhere where you don't know the rules of the game, so you may step into a game you can't play. And that powerlessness, the frustration, and everything that it elicits, that is what this is about for me.

Marieke: So you step into a game where you don't know the rules?

Amir [Dutch/Farsi, actor]: I think that's very well said.

We believe that the essence of co-creative, less extractive, more relational, less exclusionary knowledge production is not about "giving voice" to marginalized people (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020), as "there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" (Roy, 2004). As we experienced, Leila, Hossein, Amir, Jan, Iris, Karim, Reza, Yasmin, Carla, Anna, Peter, and the other members of our team really did not need to be "given" a voice. Rather, each of these individuals intrinsically holds a unique voice that showed deep and embodied analyses of the issues under discussion (cf. Shea, 2024). Our job as facilitators of the research process, then, is to co-create and hold the space (Pascoe et al., 2020) for these voices to come forward, by making participants feel safe and supported *and* provoked and challenged to bring their issues to the table, negotiate their meaning, and decide what to do with that knowledge (Bune, 2023; Österlind, 2008).

This requires a radically humble positioning, in which the facilitator/spaceholder also needs to acknowledge the way the relations within the group are structured by exclusionary divisions and hierarchies (de Noronha, 2022)—in our case, based on racialization, language skills, nativity, and researcher/participant dynamics—and attempt to create a space that may not take away these power relations but does attempt to take away any blockages to the expression of voice that emerge as a result of these power differences.

In this article, we have shown how we created and held the space for a plurality of voices to shed light on a plurality of mobile experiences that are about facing fear and trauma, hope and despair, choice and force, expectation and frustration, waiting and action, as discussed in the dialogue above. As we have seen both in the internal rehearsal process and in interaction with wider audiences, this does not lead to "happy-clappy" (Wise & Noble, 2016) living together but instead becomes a space where voices can be heard and negotiated through friction, which may unsettle fixed hierarchies and lead to more dynamic and embodied relations.

Building on the literature and our own experiences discussed in this article, we suggest that in order to create and hold the space and remove blockages of voices to move towards co-created convivial methods of knowledge production, the researcher/facilitator/spaceholder must do their best to meet five basic conditions:

1. Reflect on different positionings and power relations, and put in the work to try to unsettle these (Wise & Noble, 2016), by co-creating a space in which all people involved are both teacher and student at the same time, and are open to being transformed in the process. In our project we tried to create a playing field that was as equal as possible by attending to language, and by using improv and TO methods to "rewire" our brains (Drinko, 2013) away from fixed perspectives and take different perspectives. When we ran into a conflict with underlying notions of structural inequalities, we invested time and energy to mediate the conflict, reject racist and nationalist notions of difference (Valluvan, 2016), and insist on principles of equality and dignity, but we also had to acknowledge our limits there.
2. Ensure transparency, clarity, trust, and safety with regard to the goal of the process, what is expected of participants, and what will happen with the results. We did this by coming in with a clear and tested methodology that was ready to work with, and by taking extensive time to provide all information about the goal and format of the rehearsals and the performance. During the sessions, we provided clarity through predictable structures, including clear opening and closure rounds and time management.
3. When working with people that are surviving in daily life and are in a constant state of alertness, it is vital that we create conditions where people can temporarily have a break from that crisis mode, to be able to relax and take a step back to reflect on their lives (Davids et al., 2024) and listen to the "other" (Ghorashi, 2014). In our case, this was especially relevant for the refugee newcomers in the group, who were in the process of finding housing, learning the language, navigating the administrative system, finding employment, and family reunification. We were heavily indebted to the BOOST community centre, a welcoming physical space where people clearly felt safe and at home, and our project could build on that.
4. Make sure that a plurality of voices are equally heard and mutually and actively negotiated (Merlín-Escorza, 2024). We tried to do this by consistently translating back and forth between languages, and by eliciting and writing up single-word reflections, jointly deciding on which words to elaborate further on, and having dialogical reflections on their meaning. This worked to a certain extent: Language inequalities still emerged when people would get into enthusiastic and fast discussions and forget to translate.
5. Strike a balance between attending to the personal and the political dimensions of what emerges (Österlind, 2008). We did so by consistently reflecting, first, on how we *feel* after a particular exercise, allowing space for, but not enforcing, emotions and personal reflections; and second, what the observations and feelings *mean* for understanding the topic of arriving in a new place (Stanfield, 2000).

6. Conclusion

In this article we have discussed three distinct processes through which applied theatre can serve as a convivial co-creative research methodology to co-create knowledge on living together in refugee-receiving societies. The first is creating a shared playing field around shared interests and skills that are inviting to, but do not isolate or essentialize, migrants. Having fun and the ability to communicate with each other is crucial in this process. The second process is creating space for a plurality of voices and experiences rather than an overemphasis on marginalization. Simple yet carefully crafted verbal and physical exercises, inspired by the

TO, improvisation theatre and physical theatre, and co-creative analysis based on similarly simple but effective reflection questions, created a space where people felt supported and encouraged to portray their own positions, to be nuanced, focused and alert, while also being attentive to, challenging and negotiating the position of others. And the third process is partially dismantling hierarchical power relations in the research process. Through the discussion of some of the techniques, we hope to have contributed to the question of the "how" of co-creative methods that challenge structural mechanisms of exclusion and extraction in knowledge production.

Yet most of all, we argue that the essence of co-creative convivial knowledge production is creating and holding space for marginalized voices to be heard and negotiated. In the space that is created, there is hard work and fun, negotiation, and creativity on the part of all the participants involved. In that space, differences can be a source of creativity and the basis for a better-shared world (Kaptani et al., 2021; Venkatesan et al., 2024), or at least, in all its imperfection, a better-shared knowledge production.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

Written, anonymized field notes can be shared upon request via the first author. Due to privacy regulations, the video material cannot be shared.

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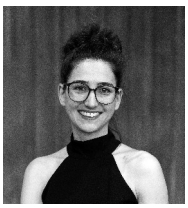
About the Authors

Marieke van Houte is an assistant professor for cultural anthropology and development studies, and a senior researcher for human geography at the Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Her research focuses on issues of migration/mobilities in the context of social change, identity/belonging, and conflict. She actively searches for innovative methods using co-creative, theatrical, and participatory methods. Her long-term goal is to contribute to navigating the complexities of social change through solid and more just knowledge production, teaching and outreach. With compassion, creativity, and connectedness.



Maria Charlotte Rast (PhD) is a researcher and lecturer in the Department of Sociology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In her research, she focuses on the challenges, opportunities, and conditions of co-creative endeavors between scholars, professionals, volunteers, civil society players, and other individuals and communities with and without refugee background. Her work shows how such endeavors are conditioned by, navigate within, and transform exclusionary academic and societal structures.