

Recognizing Everyday Youth Agency: Advocating for a Reflexive Practice in Everyday International Relations

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This article intervenes in the ongoing discussion of Everyday international relations (IR). It draws on the discourse of epistemic injustice to explore the discussions of emerging research on everyday childhood. The article draws on a series of research visits, between 2017 and 2019, along the so-called Balkan Route attending to the emerging influence of children in the Greek Reception and Identification Centre, on the island of Samos. The article references the emerging discourses of “field” research within the discipline of IR, noting the dynamic nature of such ventures and the role of a reflexive practice therein. Using open-ended interviews, research diaries, and author observations, the article provides a detailed description of the role that education nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on the island play in supporting child refugees, while opening up spaces of education, solidarity, and community building. It argues for the inclusion of children, as agents, within the discussions of Everyday IR to redress the erasure of children’s lived experience within everyday IR. The potential role of adults in this process is acknowledged and the article puts forward an alternative understanding of the adult/child relationship paying attention to the dynamics of power, the need for reflexive and critical listening, to hear the stories and ideas of children and young people, on their own terms aware that the article itself falls prey to some of the articulated challenges. It hopes to ignite a conversation beyond the (potential) central role for children in Everyday IR imagining their role within knowledge production.

Le présent article s’inscrit dans le cadre du débat actuel sur les relations internationales au quotidien (Everyday International Relations). Il se fonde sur le discours de l’injustice épistémique pour examiner les échanges concernant l’émergence des recherches sur l’enfance au quotidien. L’article se base sur une série de visites de recherche entre 2017 et 2019, le long de la route des Balkans, pour étudier l’influence naissante des enfants dans le centre de réception et d’identification grec de l’île de Samos. L’article fait référence à l’émergence du discours sur la recherche « de terrain » au sein de la discipline des relations internationales, en notant la nature dynamique de telles entreprises et le rôle d’une pratique réflexive dans celles-ci. À l’aide d’entretiens ouverts, de journaux de recherche et d’observations d’auteurs, l’article propose une description détaillée du rôle joué par les ONG pour l’éducation sur l’île. Elles viennent en aide aux enfants réfugiés, tout en créant des espaces pour l’éducation, la solidarité et la création de communautés. Il démontre la nécessité d’inclure les enfants, en tant qu’agents, dans les discussions concernant les relations internationales au quotidien afin de remédier à l’effacement de leur expérience vécue au sein de cette discipline. Sans oublier le rôle que les adultes peuvent jouer dans ce processus, l’article propose une autre façon d’envisager les relations entre adultes et enfants, qui s’intéresse particulièrement aux dynamiques de pouvoir, à la nécessité d’une écoute réflexive et critique, et d’écouter les histoires et idées des enfants et des jeunes, selon leurs conditions et sans ignorer qu’elle est elle-même sujette aux défis présents. L’objectif visé est d’engager une conversation qui dépasse le rôle central (potentiel) des enfants dans les relations internationales du quotidien, en imaginant plutôt leur rôle en termes de production de connaissances.

Este artículo contribuye al debate actual sobre las relaciones internacionales cotidianas. Se basa en el discurso de la injusticia epistémica para analizar los debates de la investigación emergente sobre la infancia cotidiana. El artículo se basa en una serie de visitas de investigación, entre 2017 y 2019, a lo largo de la llamada «Ruta de los Balcanes», con el fin de reflejar la influencia emergente de niños en el Centro de Acogida e Identificación griego, en la isla de Samos. El artículo hace referencia a los discursos emergentes de la investigación de «campo» dentro de la disciplina de las RRII, señalando la naturaleza dinámica de tales iniciativas y el papel de una práctica reflexiva en las mismas. Utilizando entrevistas abiertas, diarios de investigación y observaciones del autor, este artículo ofrece una descripción detallada del papel que desempeñan las ONG educativas de la isla en el apoyo a los niños refugiados, al tiempo que abren espacios de educación, solidaridad y consolidación de la comunidad. Este artículo defiende la inclusión de los niños, como agentes, en los debates sobre las RRII cotidianas para corregir la eliminación de las experiencias vividas por los niños en las RRII cotidianas. Reconocemos el papel potencial de los adultos en este proceso y el artículo propone una comprensión alternativa de la relación adulto/niño prestando atención a la dinámica del poder y a la necesidad de una escucha reflexiva y crítica para escuchar las historias e ideas de los niños y jóvenes en sus propios términos, aunque somos conscientes de que el propio artículo sufre la influencia de algunos de los desafíos articulados. Se espera provocar una conversación más allá del (potencial) papel central de los niños en las RRII cotidianas imaginando su papel dentro de la producción de conocimiento.

Introduction

This article, and its arguments, are situated at the intersection of international relations (IR), migration studies, and child development.¹ We celebrate the turn toward the Everyday in IR but question who has been excluded from it.² In making this intervention, we suggest that—while there has been a growing focus on the voices and experiences of young people in IR (see, e.g., Brocklehurst 2006; Berents 2015; Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015; Pruitt 2015; Marshall Beier 2020)—the field still has a lot to learn about the role of children and young people in grounding our understanding of lived experience in spaces of instability, displacement, and insecurity. That broader failure to fully engage with the experiences of children and young people, either directly or indirectly, ignores the agency they have in directing their own lifeworlds and the lifeworlds of adults around them. We suggest that through engagement with early work focusing on recognizing young people's agency in peace and security studies (Brocklehurst 2006; Berents 2015, 2018; Marshall Beier 2020), as well as scholarship in other disciplines (Wall 2012, 2022) such as childhood studies, we can contribute to this conversation and start to build space in IR to recognize children meaningfully and to allow them to be the focus. We suggest that IR, a field grounded in questions of power, could be ideally placed to be sensitive to power imbalances (Spyrou 2016) that exist when adult researchers engage in questions of childhood and youth agency. We suggest that doing so will not only broaden the scope of IR but also contribute to the development of richer and more detailed knowledge of IR's effects on people's everyday lives. This is particularly important, we suggest, because “young people play an important part in the negotiation of daily life in their communities but are rarely acknowledged” (Berents 2018, 3).

This article argues that scholars must carve out a space wherein children's views and experiences can be taken seriously. It argues that political agency should be recognized for all, not only the children and young people who rise above the parapet and are deemed to be in some way exceptional. Once established, we suggest that children and young people, and their agency, can feature in the rehearsal of Everyday IR. This is vital if the study of Everyday IR is to offer a complete and robust discourse relevant to the discipline—one that can recognize groups that have, in the past, been marginalized from these discussions (Berents 2015). We offer evidence, drawing on research undertaken along the “Balkan Route” originating in 2017 and continuing to this day, which explains the importance of this argument. In making this intervention, we draw on time spent in these spaces and on interviews with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and activist organizations who worked with children and young people on Samos (our focus for this article) in 2018 and 2019. In so doing, we show not only how this particular group of young people direct their own lives, but also how they intervene—in unexpected places—in the framing and shaping of adult versions of the Everyday.

Herein lies our research puzzle. We can point to cases of young people succeeding in being heard, their stories often documented in books—for example, Bana Alabed (2017),

Malala Yousafzai (Yousafzai and Lamb 2013), or Greta Thunberg (2019). However, the fact that these young people are the exception is the problem that prompts this article. We suggest that children and young people are political beings situated in a political environment—and with agency over that environment, agency that is recognized or ignored to a greater or lesser extent based on intersecting inequalities and power structures based on age, race, gender, and disability, for example, that need to be recognized and engaged with by scholars of IR. As scholars of IR, we go further and suggest that this situated political agency informs politics but is largely ignored. We attend to this oversight, paying particular attention to the unfolding debates of Everyday IR. We highlight the need to carve out a space where adults listen to the stories of children and young people, bear witness to their experiences, and recognize how they intervene in spaces, places, and politics. We argue that this line of enquiry is prescient considering the unfolding and growing interest in Everyday IR debates and suggest that it is paramount that the voices of children are included in these discussions.

IR has opened up the site of “the Everyday” as a new knowledge source to challenge elite, top-down iterations of power, violence, and war. In so doing, it has revealed a series of conversations that attend to the mundane and idiosyncratic in the unfolding and structuring of “the political.” Yet, within this growing area of study, the role and abilities of the child or young person are often not just being silenced, but ignored altogether. When children and young people are present, they are often depicted as one-dimensional, represented by the moniker “child”—a representative of vulnerability or victimhood rather than as an individual (Beier 2020; Bird 2022). Yet, the reality is that the mundane details of children's lives, like adults', are indeed present in the unfolding of the Everyday. However, their lives are rarely properly theorized by IR scholars. In writing this paper, our argument is that when children and young people feature in global politics, they are presented in one of two ways: representing childhood as a broad category or, when individuals are engaged with, because they reflect the exception. Yet, children's lives do feature in the Everyday, and we suggest that they ought to feature in the discourses of Everyday IR. The inclusion of their activities—and the knowledge this generates—will improve the shaping of “the political” and the politics that unfold therein. Child agents have a role to play in our understanding of both IR and international relations.

Beyond a growing field of scholarship focusing on the role of young people in peace and security studies (Brocklehurst 2006; Watson 2006; Berents 2015; Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015; Pruitt 2015; Marshall Beier 2020), the absence of children has been normalized within IR and similar fields. In paying attention to what has been “hidden, silenced, embodied, felt, normalised and depoliticised” (Åhäll 2019, 153), we hope to begin addressing that with this article. It is in the framing of the Everyday that we begin to locate our engagement with children and young people. We do not seek to offer our own notion of “the Everyday”; many others have done this.³ Rather, we invoke aspects of individual accounts of the Everyday, thereby opening a

¹ Throughout the text, IR is used to refer to the discipline of international relations and *ir* to refer to events that unfold and populate its discourses.

² Throughout the article, “Everyday” is used to reflect the academic discourse of Everyday IR, whereas *everyday* is used when speaking of unfolding events that inform daily life and may relate to academic discourses but not the academic discourse itself.

³ It is important to note that, in what follows, we draw almost explicitly on the publications in the 2019 special issue of Everyday IR published in *Cooperation and Conflict*. This is not to suggest that it is the primary site of Everyday IR publications. In writing this piece, we were significantly influenced by the arguments of Acuto (2014), Stanley and Jackson (2016), and Solomon and Steele (2017) to name but a few.

space to reflect further on where children and young people can and already do feature. [Guillaume and Huysmans \(2019, 279\)](#) suggest that the Everyday in IR “clarifies what specific operations one seeks to perform—in our case on the understandings of politics—through analytically mobilising particular lineages of thought that named themselves, or have been named by others, as ‘doing the everyday’.” We draw on the notion of lineage presented by Guillaume and Huysmans to provide a reflexive commentary on the way in which children and young people orient their lives in spaces of displacement. We examine the space of the now closed Reception and Identification Centre on the island of Samos, together with surrounding support networks, by way of framing our argument. This focus on young people as agents is a theme that emerged during our time on Samos. As such, our approach in this piece is to share our reflections—cognizant of the limitations within the project—and to offer our thoughts on opportunities for further work and the need to recognize and engage with “the widely varied subject positions or complex intersectionalities of actual lived childhoods” ([Beier 2020, 2](#)). However, we do not claim to have achieved this yet, and instead offer our reflections on how we came to this point and the importance we see in recognizing the role of children and young people meaningfully in IR work.

By way of establishing our argument, we turn first to our methodology. Then, we draw on key conceptual discussions to frame our reflections from Samos. We engage with questions of epistemic injustice, “childism” ([Wall 2022](#)) and everyday agency to think through the role children and young people can and do play in directing everyday environments and politics in spaces and places of displacement and support.

Methods

Our writing draws on research collected during multiple visits (in 2018 and 2019) to the island of Samos and the refugee support services supporting individuals housed in and around the (now closed) Vathy Reception and Identification Centre (RIC). In carrying out this research, we draw on ethnographic methods associated with being in the place ([Richardson 2003](#)), drawing on multiple visits to build relationships and facilitate “an organic process of making connections, tracing webs of relations, embracing chance meetings [and] letting the social maps of the ordinary everyday unfold” ([Selimovic 2019, 137](#)). In taking this approach, we recognize the risks associated with short visits to a particular “field,” as well as the conceptualization of a “field” itself—a space into which scholars can enter having stepped down from the ivory tower for a short period of time to “make sense” of the world. We are conscious and mindful of [Cabot’s \(2019\)](#) warnings against brief engagements with a region, which can lead to inaccuracies and misrepresentations. Yet, like many academics, we are unable to control all the factors that determine our ability to travel and spend prolonged periods of time in the region, including, but not limited to, “teaching responsibilities, administrative duties, personal and family related considerations and access to travel funding” ([Kušić and Záhora 2020](#)).

In recognizing these constraints, as well as the vulnerability and loneliness that can be felt when embarking on “field-work,” we have chosen to work collaboratively, drawing on one another’s strengths and reflecting collectively on what we have seen and engaged with, thereby challenging the neoliberal assumptions of the sole researcher that often underpin methodology discussions ([Gunesch and Nolte 2020](#)).

As such, in making this contribution, we draw on a collective period of time on the island of twenty weeks, taking place over repeated visits, as well as ongoing conversations with NGOs and activists working long term on the island. Our material for this paper includes twenty interviews, field-work diaries, and observations, including with the NGO Still I Rise, which until recently ran an informal education center for twelve- to seventeen-year-olds on the island. In setting the framework and parameters of this work, we are also focusing on children and young people between the ages of twelve and seventeen years in thinking through our arguments. However, we are keen not to suggest that these same points could not also apply to younger age groups. For now, though, in light of what we witnessed on Samos, this is our focus. This time spent on Samos was embedded within a much larger period spent working on the “Balkan Route” ([Bird et al. 2021](#)) during an ongoing project of repeated visits starting in 2017.

As mentioned previously, our initial research focus was not on the intervention of children in the Everyday. Yet, as with all trips into the “field,” “flexibility and ad-hoc decisions become the norm rather than an exception” ([Kušić and Záhora 2020](#))—and the importance of children’s lives, agency, and engagement became ever more apparent. We reflected on what we were witnessing, noting with interest young people’s presence and directorial agency. Due to our work’s changing focus, in this paper we discuss the everyday agency of young people. We do so by relying on interviews with the adults who support them alongside our own observations while in the spaces where they were making their interventions. In making this intervention, we acknowledge the potential critique that we have engaged with adults and not with young people themselves. This is valid, and we recognize this limitation within this paper. However, our reflexive research approach led to our recognition of young people’s agency and their ability to direct and influence spaces and places of displacement support, particularly the environment on the island of Samos. As a result, we see this intervention as a starting point rather than a conclusion; its value lies in sharing reflections that led us to recognize the importance of hearing young people’s voices and interventions. We acknowledge that young people as agents did not inform our research design or goals. We see our commentary here as offering a first step to better understanding young people’s agential role in affecting the Everyday. In making this intervention, we advocate for further research “in which narratives, life stories and stories of encounter can emerge” ([Esin and Lounasmaa 2020, 393](#))—and young people’s own voices can be centered. We argue that the work of peace and conflict studies and critical security studies in this area offers a framework by which to do this. We also offer our reflections and observations from Samos as a contribution to this growing field of work. Therefore, what we offer in this paper is an argument directed at broader IR scholarship about the need to listen and learn from the small but growing contribution in our own discipline, as well as the work of other fields and practitioners engaging with children and young people. As our argument unfolds in the ensuing sections, we turn to the discourse of epistemic justice, interweaving it alongside emerging discussions of an Everyday ethic of IR to demonstrate that children’s experiences do, and should, matter to the discipline of IR.

Part One—The Silencing of Children

We begin with a rehearsal of discussions of epistemic injustice. We draw on the writings of [Fricker \(2007\)](#), who states

that epistemic injustice occurs when those who are speaking or bearing witness are discredited because of their epistemic constitution. Fricker defines two forms of injustice: first, testimonial injustice (the telling of the story), and second, hermeneutical injustice (the development/positional framework of the agent). The first emerges when those charged with hearing a story deem the storyteller to lack credibility. The second occurs when those rehearsing an interpretation of the world are deemed unable to properly articulate the experience, owing to a deficit of abilities and/or training. Originally, we were concerned with the problems of testimonial injustice, namely that children's and young people's stories were discredited owing to their ongoing development and assumed nonlinear interpretations of the world. While children's and young people's views were taken into account in some cases, they were not considered to be agents with decision-making power (Archard and Uniacke 2021); they were being unjustly ignored because they were not recognized as "rational" agents. In engaging with this phrase, we recognize the inherent problems they invite, emerging from within a western, enlightened genealogy. We engage critically with these concepts and address some of these challenges as this section unfolds. A second challenge emerged while engaging with the Everyday IR literature. Other than in a small but growing literature discussed above, children and young people were not just written out of discourse owing to their position and ongoing development—they were not even being considered.

Recognition of this absence of children and young people from formal IR discourses is not new. Watson (2006), for example, asks if children can be sites of knowledge, pointing out where their daily activities already feature. She indicates that children are engaged in conflict as both passive subjects and active agents, as evidenced in the role child soldiers continue to play in conflicts around the world. It is a well-documented phenomenon within IR,⁴ and Watson (2006) (and others; see, e.g., Sanghera 2008, 2016) demonstrates where and how children contribute to a globalized economy. Yet, children's contribution in an everyday, globalized context remains underexplored. To better understand this, we turn to the work of Schapiro (1999), who suggests that children are understood within western circles as a site of development—something in the process of becoming. This developmental process is understood to be fragile, with children needing special attention. This attention has often been characterized by paternal notions of care. The focus on becoming engenders a sense of innocence, which ought to be protected by more knowing and worldlier beings: adults.

Within this conception of the child, there is a particular role the empowered adult fulfils—ensuring that children are schooled to embrace the underlying ethos of "rational man." Children and their lived experiences are not given due credit. They are fledglings, in development and unable to fully contribute to political concepts and assumptions that underpin western enlightenment thought. Cockburn (1998) supports this iteration of children. He writes that children in their traditional depiction are believed to be irrational, emotional, and bewildered as they attempt to negotiate the world. It is a negotiation that, according to Cohen (2005), cosses children in paternal structures ensuring their obedience, silence and, ultimately, removal from the formal sites of the political. Children and young people are spoken for, not listened to. Within this, there is a

danger that adults then conflate children's lifeworlds with their own. Herein lies the source of hermeneutical epistemic injustice. The ongoing development and paternal cossing of children in the western world engender a particular form of silencing. Consequently, within the sphere of the political, children and young people can be said to be unjustly denied authorship and agency.

While the definitions of Everyday IR vary in scope, breadth, and goal (Björkdahl, Hall, and Svensson 2019), they are predominantly united in that they embrace the adult's positionality. Not only are adults producing knowledge, the stories they tell and the actors they engage with are predominantly adult. For example, Åhäll's (2019) lived experience testifies to adults engaged in solidarity activism, while Selimovic (2019) offers three serial ethnographic studies of adults engaging in various forms of benign agency. What is more, as one reads through the text of Guillaume and Huysmans (2019), there emerges an understanding of who within the political might benefit from a rereading of politics and the Everyday. They write of its democratic potential, suggesting that specific political agents, namely,

women, workers, citizens, soldiers, individuals belonging to subaltern groups, scholars, etc – back in our analytics of the international/global, by putting forth how they are affected by or engaging with the international/global in their quotidian lives and how ultimately their practices are a key part of the international/global. (Guillaume and Huysmans 2019, 284–85)

Perhaps children and young people are subsumed within the subaltern, and if they are, this comes with its own challenges. However, it has become clear that this body of work must be connected with emerging IR literature that engages with the Everyday experiences of children and young people. In particular, we note the value of scholarship from within critical security studies (Beier 2016, 2018), as well as the work of peacebuilding scholars (Berents, Brockelhurst). They provide insightful knowledge, building on the interventions of Watson (2006) revealing the scope and depth of engagement children and young people can and do offer to unfolding discussions of the Everyday.

We attend to the work of Berents and McEvoy-Levy (2015), whose engagement with children and the Everyday predates the 2019 Special Issue on the Everyday. The Everyday, they write, is:

illuminated as an embodied practice, as the site of intergenerational tension, and as a political space for contestations of belonging. The everyday is rendered complex and diverse through considerations of gendered politics and the symbolic power of certain interactions of childhood. It is located as a transnational, subversive, mediate space led by young people themselves. (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015, 124)

There is value within this earlier interpretation of the Everyday. It situates childhood at the heart of its ideas. Unlike the Everyday IR definitions that follow it, it fosters a space to interrogate and challenge traditional iterations of childhood as well as the adult/child relationship. Furthermore, its focus on embodiment opens up space to discuss affect and emotions, which are key to Everyday experiences. Like feminist scholarship, it notes the challenges of those set outside the political and the need to contest power relations that sustain the status quo. Yet, as we suggest in the ensuing section, it is not simply the case that youth agency exists either with, or without, an adult relationship. Our

⁴For an overview of selected authors who write specifically on this topic, see, for example, Boyden (2003), Dallaire (2011), and Martins (2011).

examination of youthful curiosity, in the context of agency, reveals that there can also be a need to understand the adult's presence along a continuum informed by the child's age and development. Fully engaging in the questions of epistemic injustice is not just challenging the adult relationship; it is also to wonder at the adult and their qualities within the relationship itself. This then allows for children's experiences to inform IR's conception of the Everyday and the relationship it enjoys with the global. In what follows, we turn our attention to a particular rendering of the adult within this unfolding conversation.

Our first attempt at understanding who and what that adult might be was theoretical, guided by an interweaving of our reflexive learning and the guidance of [Ackerley and True's \(2008\)](#) idea of reflexive practice. They write of the need to engage with research findings, especially when they are unexpected—to render them sensible and wonder at the relationship the findings may or may not have with the research project's original goals. This resonated with our own experiences in the field and prompted us to re-story our initial reading of [Selimovic's \(2019\)](#) work. This was not by way of critique, but rather by paying attention to the value of Everyday youthful agency and imagining it in the context of children's lived experiences. [Selimovic's \(2019\)](#) story transports the reader to the sights, sounds, and smells of Ras al-Mud. We are asked to imagine a kitchen after dinner, when children are turning to their homework as the day begins to end. It is a memory that resonates with many who have experienced the reluctant necessity of this task in their daily lives, be it within their own childhood or as adult carers. Yet, as the story is rehearsed, the details are not of the homework or the tasks the son faces. It is not a story that originates with or is told by a child. Indeed, she writes, "Every night, the father, Hamid, works on maths with his nine-year-old son" ([Selimovic 2019](#), 139). Attention, in this phrase, is drawn to the adult, not the child. This sets the stage for a particular telling of this vignette. It will be framed and narrated through adult experiences, adopting an adult gaze.

Homework from school suggests a child's task—one that adults can support but not where they take the leading role. The details of the child's success and struggles do not follow. The reader is offered an account of familial relations within and beyond the wall. It extends to a discussion of marital challenges, whereby the child doing homework is forgotten while the mother, also specifically named, reflects on being married, but at a distance. Nawal tells her audience of her marital challenges: her pain, her worry, the lack of her husband's presence in their daily lives. While the story concludes by way of a rehearsal of agency across a boundary, the story does not divulge details of the child's work or the child's story. The child, never named, is silenced—although the act of homework, as suggested by the subheading, is that of a child. Instead, the story closes with a reflection on parenthood and the maintenance of family ties as a space of political protest. This is an acknowledgment of how the Everyday can be a constructed "site of protest" but a failure to recognize that the child's Everyday experience could also have been centered here. We wonder how, and what, knowledge might be gleaned if the child was the storyteller in this situation.

To clarify, this re-storied reading of [Selimovic's](#) work is not offered by way of critique on our part. We recognize a research design that contributes to an interweaving of Everyday agency, not the role of children per se. Yet, when this work is situated alongside our own experience in the field, we recognize the potential for an Everyday account of young people's lives in our own work. Framing this account

within an account of "homework" also highlighted the central space of schools more generally for a young person's agency to unfold. As we turn to the ensuing section, we rehearse the daily activities that we observed during our ongoing visits to Samos. We draw on notions of solidarity and education, and we imagine the type of knowledge children produce. Then, we wonder how this knowledge can play out in the Everyday. This sets the stage, in part three, for a discussion of how we moved from a theoretical engagement with reflexivity to one of reflexive practice. This discussion covers how we have begun to action our own learning, seeking out a suitable framework for imagining an adult able to listen and hear the Everyday lived experiences of youth agency. In so doing, we hope to outline a process that decenters the researcher's power, prompting unlearning on the adult's part. We do so to imagine a dynamic adult/child partnership, which invites a space for the knowledge children and young people can produce within the Everyday, as well as its role influencing IR.

Part Two—Everyday Life

The desire to carve out a space for children within Everyday IR originates in our experiences and observations on the island of Samos, Greece. During these visits, we witnessed the way children and young people exist on the island, carving out spaces for themselves with and without adults' help and support. We build on the idea of homework and broaden the scope to discuss how education, formal and informal, orients the lives of children and young people. We bring to bear [Ahmed's \(2006\)](#) articulation of orientation to remember that being oriented is to follow certain lines of sight, to have a destination and to follow a certain path and behavior. With this understanding, we suggest that education can orient the lives of children and young people—those seeking safety or otherwise. [Wood \(2012\)](#) writes of children's Everyday experiences of citizenship; she notes the importance of school and education institutions for children when defining themselves, developing relationships and enacting a particular form of citizenship. We suggest—blending the ideas of [Wood \(2012\)](#) and [Ahmed \(2006\)](#)—that going to school can provide a timetable of work, rest, and play. Yet, in its absence—especially when absence is forced upon them—children can carve out space and time to develop on their own terms. In doing so, they can also make interventions that—if listened to and recognized—could be important for IR scholars' thinking.

In attending to the lives of the children living in Vathy RIC and the wider town, we draw on the various flows, rhythms, and effects that inform their experiences of "the Everyday." We turn to the founding of an NGO, Still I Rise, intended to fill the gaps in state education provision by providing informal schooling and recreational activities for children and young people. Drawing on these observations, we recognize the need to establish an ethical space where children can demonstrate their capacity for agency. Yet, before we return to the relationship of agency and epistemic injustice as it relates to children within the Everyday, we reflect on the place of children within and throughout an adult conception of the Everyday. We also offer a pathway to the (potential) creation of such a space—the focus of this article's third and final section. In what follows, we reflect on spaces that have opened up within and beyond formal sites of education so as to discuss how children and young people can simply "be" themselves, carve out friendships, test out their burgeoning agency, and begin to make their way in the world. At the same time, we question how they showcase and exert their

agency—and how this agency allows them to intervene with (and without) permission in an adult world.

On Samos in 2018/19, not all children and young people within the asylum process were able to attend local schools full-time. This was partly because some lacked the vaccinations required for entry, but also because the schooling system lacked space. As a result, those with up-to-date vaccinations were restricted to afternoon classes. Prior to 2018, there was also a reluctance to bring education programs to the islands because enrolling children in school suggested a longer stay, and the RICs were supposed to be temporary. However, as the length of stay on the islands increased, there was recognition that schooling needed to be offered. Therefore, some afternoon classes were set up for children awaiting an asylum decision (Author interview with ministry official, Athens, 2019), but there were always young people outside of these programs. The afternoon program also faced local pushback from parents because it restricted access to the Greek education system. However, two NGOs took on the role of informal education providers on Samos at this time, carving out a physical space dedicated to children and their education. Praxis supported children between the ages of six and eleven years, and Still I Rise supported those between the ages of twelve and seventeen years (Still I Rise 2019). During our visits to Mazi, Still I Rise's youth center—where we had gone to learn more about NGO provision on the island—we first heard stories about children and young people exercising agency and directing their own lives within the NGO-provided space. It was a safe space for these young people. Friendships and community developed within the youth center. For example, it is not simply enough to show up to class sparingly. Our interviews with Mazi coordinators explained the ritual of welcoming students into the school community on a more permanent basis (author interview; Still I Rise 2019). In 2019, at the time of our interviews, children and young people first had to attend the center for at least two weeks before being “formally” inducted into the community. At this point, students were offered a Mazi rucksack and pencil case, which quickly identified them as Mazi students: a source of pride seen as a marker of being a community member.

On the walls of Mazi, there was a mural of a tree with leaves formed out of hearts. During our visit to the school, Mazi coordinators explained the tree's significance to us (author interview; Still I Rise 2019). Students added their name to the tree once they were fully enmeshed within the community and embraced the informal school's values. The tree was painted alongside the poem *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou. This, we were told, was the source of the Mazi youth center's values—and the values of the NGO more broadly. By joining the Mazi community and embracing these ideals, students were exercising a conscientious choice. They were reflecting on the time they had spent in the space. What is more, they were, through their lived experience, understanding what those values meant in the everyday context of their own unfolding lives in both Vathy and Mazi, stating their intention to be a part of it. Thus, as they chose to attend the center every day, they were enacting a form of seemingly mundane agency. Their presence in the school was a symbol of a rational form of deliberation and action akin to the required ideas of adult agency that informs the political. It revealed that they had chosen, of their own accord, to accept the school's values and abide by them within and beyond its walls. They had chosen to be a part of the community and to embody what that meant within their daily lives.

Membership of the Mazi community also involved taking on leadership roles. For example, the young people took an active role in the cultivation of the student community, both within and beyond the classroom. In 2019, the youth center had four educational levels based on age and English proficiency; their website reminded guests that the space was created “with, not for, refugee learners” (Still I Rise 2019). At the time of our visit, the center hosted a dinner for its students each Saturday evening; one week it was the lower levels, the next week, the more advanced cohorts. This meal represented much to the students. Not only was it time away from the camp, but it was also a time to socialize, build friendships, and forge a space where they could find refuge from the everyday lives they lived in the RIC and the camp's surrounding area (referred to as “the jungle”). Here, the Mazi leadership team discussed how children took on an organizational role coordinating food, laying the table, and doing the washing up. Teachers simply provided a set of boundaries within which this all took place (author interview; Still I Rise 2019).

Still I Rise also organized clean-up days where the young people took the lead in going to the shoreline and the town to clean up public spaces—improving the environment for their own community and for the island's wider population. These acts of community and solidarity achieved two ends. First, they demonstrated the young people's enthusiasm to contribute to and be part of their current local environment. Second, they demonstrated the agency of young people in recognizing a problem—the RIC's effect on the environment—and a proactive desire to improve things. In doing so, they demonstrated a sense of solidarity with the local community as well as agency in looking to improve the everyday experiences of those in the town—be they members of the local community, the refugee community, or holiday makers on the island. Young people supported by organizations such as these sometimes go on to volunteer with them, continuing to develop the environment in which children are supported and thinking more deeply about how they can continue crafting a better everyday for young people who follow them through the system. An active role for young people, then, is encouraged—one that provides a safe space but recognizes that children can set the direction of travel for their collective lives.

It is important to highlight these spaces. Adults set the boundaries to provide a space where children and young people can take the lead, test boundaries, and enact a form of agency that allows them to develop a wider awareness of the need to be responsible and accountable. For example, the island is, in reality, a transit space—albeit one that transitions extremely slowly, with some at that time waiting over two years for their first meeting of the asylum process (Bird et al. 2019). Yet, once children and young people gain access to the mainland, a greater level of freedom and autonomy can await them. Thus, having the space to practice how to safely engage in such spaces is key to their time in Vathy. Still I Rise looked to support young people's transition off the island by including discussions of self-care and protection in the absence of adults into their curriculum. Our interviews with Mazi coordinators outlined the curriculum they developed for their students (author interview, Still I Rise 2019). They went beyond traditional education lessons, including information sessions related to child grooming, consent, and how to follow the rules of the unaccompanied minor system upon arriving in Athens. If not for this support and the opportunity to test out their own agency, their precarity and situational vulnerability would be that much greater upon departing the island.

At first glance, this curriculum is seemingly a very personal one. However, it points to a wider engagement with the political because it supports young people in becoming oriented in a space and situation (the asylum system and the camp) while being aware of the diverse trajectories they may follow in future. It is a curriculum that recognizes their situation not only as young people, but also as people claiming asylum, who are often marginalized gendered and racialized, made vulnerable (Bird 2022), and put at additional risks that would not be faced by other young people, thus making these classes so important, not only because of their age, but also because of the other intersecting discriminations they face within the Greek asylum system. As students leave the island and transfer to the mainland, they begin a wider engagement with the migration system. Their Everyday IR becomes more globalized as the choreographed movement of asylum-seeking minors comes face to face with the systems and ever-changing legal procedures of The Ministry for Citizens' Protection. As their worlds expand, so too does the possibility for increasingly influential forms of agency—and the need for its recognition. Here, the value of Mazi's curriculum grows in relevance. It provides children and young people with decision-making tools for their unfolding futures and expanding lifeworlds. For unaccompanied minors, it bears noting that they will travel into their futures alone, more often than not. The political will drives their capacity to make agential decisions within the Greek and broader European migration systems every day.

Part Three—Developing a Reflexive Practice

Our time on Samos pushed us to further reflect on the fact that children and young people are agents with a profound engagement with the political (Author field notes. Samos. 2019). However, youth agency can be different from adults' agency. In the same way, the agency of one group of adults may differ from that of another's as a result of power structures and intersecting inequalities that alter and effect individual agential power. Young people often work within predefined boundaries, occasionally pushing back against them, while many adults, due to their positionality, often engage directly with the political and its structures. For some, this means being keepers of the status quo. Those adults' powerful position is in full view here. What is more, as our observations reveal, youth agency embraces a form of curiosity or learning; some choose to (and some have to) make their way in the world on their own terms. We recognize that youthful curiosity invokes a particular form of meaning, making it unlike an adult's. Put differently, youthful curiosity can unfold in relation to the adult, with greater flexibility and freedom acquired with age. Adult roles differ depending on their own positionality as well as the situation in which young people find themselves. Adults, nor young people, cannot be thought of as one homogeneous group. Their relationships are filled with complexities and differences, whether they are NGO workers, parents, guardians, representatives of the asylum process, or they themselves are also seeking asylum. Inherent in all these identities and relationships are complex experiences that effect the way in which they choose to, or are able to, support youthful curiosity. Within this framework they can be supportive, restrictive, or even violent, but playing that role is an expression of power. In many cases, adult curiosity is privileged; those adults can choose to situate its unfolding within or beyond a relational framework because of their assumed status as rational beings (within a very particular

contextualization of western enlightenment thought). This same choice is often not assumed for young people's lives. Their daily experiences unfold within a web of intersecting power relationships informed by western, enlightened prescriptions of rationality. This approach is in keeping with a western, liberal sense of order premised on the state and the social contract. It reflects the underlying dependency that shapes many articulated definitions of children, where their views are taken into account but they lack full decision-making power (Archard and Uniack 2021). A further problem with this proscription of youth is well-documented in Beier's (2015, 2018) research. The assumed universality in which western enlightenment thinking presents a view of childhood actually contributes to erasing particularities of lived experiences lying beyond its western genesis. Consequently, the intersecting legacy of a global, colonial world—alongside ongoing hierarchies of race and class—fails to resonate within the literature. A fully developed intersectional analysis of youth agency lies beyond this article. We acknowledge the need to fully interrogate the ongoing harms of epistemic justice; as this article draws to a close, we offer a starting point for such future conversations. Those conversations need to take the lived experience of children and young people seriously—not as an assumed universal conception, but based on individual lived experiences and intersectional experiences of what it is to grow from childhood to adulthood. Whether that path is thought of as linear or as complex and messy—and whether it is thought of in terms of agency or rationality—these ideas should be challenged. Engaging with these questions outside of western enlightenment thought will be key to truly understanding the role of young people in Everyday IR.

Witnessing the everyday unfolding of youth agency demanded that we reorient our future approach to research design—much like we applied a re-storying approach upon a secondary reading of Selimovic's work—uncovering secondary data and imagining alternative orientations. Our goal in this section is to outline our own future research design possibilities, informed by the unfolding youth agency we witnessed and the activists who supported it. Here, we build on the reflexive work that began on Samos and embrace the reflexive agent's position as articulated by Amoureux and Steele (2015). We work within the possibilities of unknowing and uncertainty—mindful of the subjective position this negotiation entails—and putting our reflexive critique into practice. In so doing, we hope that we are able to transcend our focus on the adult world as we move into the future, instead negotiating the political in partnership with the youth whose lifeworlds we observed. We humbly engage with the “impossibility or incompleteness of knowing” (Park-Kang 2015, 380), curious to discover how our proposed idea will unfold. We rely on our intuition or, as Åhäll (2018) has written, our “gut feeling” to put forward a particular notion of listening, informed by a focus on uncertainty, unknowing, and difference. We interweave these various strands to outline our commitment to a research design that remains informed by the challenges of epistemic injustice—paying heed to the point noted by Beier (2018), namely that adults are the architects of the political world and that children, as subjects, are defined with reference to those self-same structures. It is, Beier reminds us, an inescapable paradox. We carry this awareness into the future, suggesting that it is a tension scholars committed to a relational, supportive world for youthful agency must constantly negotiate.

Our first task on this unfolding journey was to identify an alternative framework to situate our own reflexive

thinking. Here, we turned to the writings of Wall (2012). His articulation of childism offers an alternative rendering of the adult/child relationship and juxtaposes some of the everyday ideas put forward by Berents and McEvoy-Levy (2015). It challenges the privileged position of the adult and champions the possibilities of difference, articulating a radical account of political inclusion that pushes adults to embrace a particular understanding of responsibility. It remains distinct from childhood studies because it seeks to negotiate the tension Beier (2015) noted—that children are judged through an adult lens as objects and subjects, particularly those that rise about the parapet. The inherent value of childism, Wall writes, is that it “offers the needed critical lens for deconstructing adultism across research and societies and reconstructing more age-inclusive scholarly and social imaginations” (Wall 2022, 257). Of its many values, we chose to focus on the ways in which a childism framework allows our reflexive practice to further develop, decentering the adult’s role as the upholder of the status quo and focusing on the diversities of youth lived experience. Within this awareness, we home in on the particular role of conversing and listening within this framework.

The ability to listen guides our future engagements, mindful of the need to carve out a space within which status quo iterations of power can be acknowledged—if only to be challenged, perhaps even set aside. We are guided, in this learning journey by the works of Beausoleil (2016), who, like Wall (2012, 2022), begins with an honest rehearsal of the value of recognition through difference. Beausoleil offers an acute awareness of the role difference plays in recognition and, perhaps most importantly, in the limits of understanding (Beausoleil 2016). If, as she writes, one can acknowledge the inability to wholly grasp the idiosyncrasies of difference, the end goal of knowledge production is dramatically altered. There is no subject mastery in this presentation of voice and its listening counterpart. This awareness parallels the characteristics of the reflexive agent who, as Amoureux and Steele (2015) note, works within uncertainty to challenge the status quo. This reflexive position sustains the required skepticism discussed by Beausoleil, as well as a wider awareness that a space that exists between one’s experience, the experience of another and a mutual holistic understanding of each other. As stories are rehearsed, shared differences are foregrounded as a site of engagement. This engagement is exceptionally important as we continue to unlearn the dominant position of the adult; it is also important for the researcher, if only because, as Kallio and Häkli (2011) remind us, “children do not [always] express or play out their politics in the forms and terms familiar to adults, nor identify their own actions as political.” At the site of engagement, there is much to acknowledge and reflect upon, in terms of what is said and done as well as what is not.

Beausoleil (2016) provides an honest approximation of listening. She writes openly and acknowledges that listening receptively is the best way to overcome the barriers privilege creates—and that those who benefit from traditional power relations will be decentered and rendered less secure if this process unfolds as it ought. We continue to reflect on our own positionality and bring to bear our reflexive practice, focusing not only on what is heard but also on the opportunities for silence. We suggest that here silence provides an avenue not just to listening, but also to learning and observing what is not being said. There is value in embracing the quiet (Beattie 2019). Quiet provides a second means of troubling dominant structures of power, attending not just to our own ability to unlearn the guiding role of conversationalist, but

also how to attend to youthful silence. As Lewis (2010) argues, “silence is not neutral or empty. So, listening better requires the researcher or evaluator to be reflexive and reflective in decoding the encounter.” As Spyrou’s (2016) reflections on the coproduction of knowledge through children’s voices have taught us, the children’s silences are similarly informed by diverse intersections of power. Those engaged in research with children must be mindful of what is not said—and also pay heed to body language, silence, and alternative forms of meaning making.

Already, we can point to certain predisposed adults who embody some, if not all, of these required traits. Indeed, our reflexive work while on Samos was prompted by activists’ relationships with the youth they supported. These adults were able to respond to the Mazi youth community’s curiosity. We can see evidence of learning in the present that will sustain increasingly independent agency into the future. Moreover, as the young people cleaned up the coastline, we witnessed a partnership where youth agency could be tested in safer spaces (albeit in abject spaces) acting out forms of community building. Similarly, the adults within Mazi attended to the emotional, social, and interpersonal support of children and the politics they enacted in their unfolding everyday. Their acts—as mindful and engaged adults—continue to inform our reflexive thinking and its unfolding practice. These adults coproduced a space where young people could imagine a future of self-advocacy where they articulate their own needs, relevant to the spaces and places they have yet to travel through. Herein lies a chief contribution youth agency offers to the discipline of IR. We unpack this as we turn toward the concluding pages of this article.

Conclusion—Rising above the Parapet

Imagining an empowered role for children—as authors, as knowledge creators, perhaps even as experts—is to reconceptualize the underlying notions of power and hierarchy that inform knowledge production. However, there is risk in this endeavor, which clearly favors a radical worldview. That being said, if adults can learn to embrace a nonlinear approach to meaning making and devolve power to the child/children they are supporting, a space opens up where the voice of the child can emerge unchallenged. It was only after spending time on Samos that we came to reflect on this potential role for children—and the need for adults to support it through active listening. We also recognize that the inherent critique of our research design, enacted in the absence of children, is equally applied to the information it has produced; hence, our sympathetic reflexive re-storying of Selimovic’s (2019) writings and our commitment to reflect on the inherent epistemic injustice faced by children, conceptualized as agents, moving forward. We turn to the writing of Park-Kang (2015) and remain mindful of an empathetic imagination. Park-Kang reminds his readers that “by using imagination, creating characters, combining data with fictional narrative, or with one’s own experience, I [we] believe that more original and empathetic IR writing is possible” (Park-Kang 2015, 380). If adults can embrace this position, practice active listening, and reflexively engage with the stories, experiences, and knowledge of children, it is possible to bring the childism Wall articulated alongside the reflexive listening Beausoleil suggested to the structures informing Everyday IR in particular, and the discipline more generally.

In closing out this paper, we offer one—but by no means the only—approach to bringing this about. We have shown throughout that children demonstrate agential power, and

that this truth is important to understanding the Everyday underpinnings of the political. We have argued that by engaging with the work of scholars outside of the discipline of IR as well as with the work of adults in the field supporting children to engage, we can start to recognize the importance of children's experiences and knowledge in our understanding of Everyday IR. We have argued that these voices are often heard when they are propelled above the parapet, and that that act of propelling is often linked to questions of power and marginalization along the lines of race, gender, disability, and lived experience, to name just a few, but even then, they are recognized and rewarded through an adult-focused structure. Much work remains to be done to support the possibilities of this change. We note that within the confines of this paper, we have yet to imagine the possibilities of a fully intersectional framing of childhood. More work is needed to pay heed to the intersections of race, colonial hierarchies, class, and disabilities and what they might bring to bear on the agentic possibilities of children within the Everyday. We acknowledge that in the absence of such discussions, any account of epistemic injustice remains incomplete. Moreover, we must also acknowledge the challenges of research—noted in the methods section—and acknowledge how they trouble the possibilities of the adult/child relationship we suggest within the paper. As such, both research design, ethical permissions, and implementation must bear further reflection.

Yet, inspired by the Everyday acts of agency we witnessed on Samos, we were compelled to show that children and young people influence the political, in the everyday, locally and internationally, on their own terms. Our commitment to a reflexive practice brought us into conversation with other IR scholars interested in children and young people at the everyday level. As we discussed in this article, peace and conflict scholars have done well to highlight the instrumental way children, as objects, are used to support the claims of an imagined and hoped-for better world. At the same time, critical security study scholars challenge those who would erase the unfolding of everyday lived experiences of children and youth needed to support this very future world. As we negotiated the discourses of epistemic injustice to enter into these conversations, we were struck by just how important this particular juncture is within the conversation. If we cannot attend to present-day experiences, those that unfold in liminal and/or abject spaces, that imagined future better world will never come to be. As Schick (2011) has expertly pointed out, to focus on a future orientation—in the absence of a negotiation of present harm and trauma—denies the possibility of a future better world.

Our time on Samos revealed the power of children and young people to direct everyday life, to circumnavigate rules, to start conversations about topics that matter to them, to direct the daily activities of a youth center, and to build community and solidarity. This community has a central role to play in an unfolding future. We hope—having observed children in their daily activities on the island and speaking to the adults that sustain the boundaries of their Everyday activities—to offer one (but not the only) way to trouble the relationship that youthful agency has to its imagined futures. At the same time, we hope to provide a blueprint for an alternative role for the adult to play in its unfolding. This adult, as the article argues, must sit with discomfort and acknowledge the tension that comes from labeling the position of children and youth. Furthermore, they must embrace a relational position that begins with listening, foregrounds difference, and negotiates uncertainty and subjectivity. As we suggested in the second section, the

task of creating and maintaining an ethical space that welcomes children and young people and hears their stories remains central to this project. As our observations in part two revealed, support organizations can and do provide the necessary coproductive ethos required to establish and sustain such spaces. This is not simply a role that guardians can and should play. It is one that holds relevance for all society and particularly IR scholars focused on the everyday. What is more, there is a timeliness to this endeavor. The onset of reflexive and creative methodologies within the discipline stands poised to enhance the agency, reflexive work, and meaning making that youth agency demands. Our challenge then, as scholars of everyday IR, but in fact IR more generally, is to recognize, listen, and remain guided by young people—and to let them influence our thinking, our politics, and the sphere of international debate within which we all exist.

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