

## **Collaborations and Performative Agency in Refugee Theatre in Germany**

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**Abstract:** The article contributes to an understanding of the formation of political identities of asylum-seekers within the context of theatre in Germany. Thus, this article demonstrates the ways in which the identity of the refugee as a political activist is accomplished through performative exercise for the German audience. In doing so, the refugee-activist does not aim simply toward assimilating within German society- but rather her/his identity is formed within a context of unjust European and German asylum laws. Much scholarship has focused on the concept of networks and citizenship in the context of immigrant and refugee protests, but the notion of performative agency within the realm of refugee theatre has been less discussed. This article by exploring the performative agency of refugees, contributes to an understanding of refugee political activism in spheres other than camps and the streets. In doing so, the article contributes to consider alternate modes of refugee activism such as the cultural sphere. Data are drawn on viewing of seven performances in Germany of refugee activists from the global South as well as interviews with the theatre team.

### **Introduction**

There has been a wave of activism for refugee rights in the past two years in Germany. A theatre production, *Die Asyl-Monologe* running for three years is set within this time period. This article focuses on the ways in which refugees present themselves in their narratives related by three professional actors as well as during the discussion sessions as they interact with the audience. In doing so, the aim of the article is to highlight and examine the performative agency of refugees.

Refugees form alliances with the theatre in two main ways: firstly, by lending their stories to the theatre in the form of in-depth interviews, which is then related in the form of verbatim theatre by professional actors and secondly, by participating in the follow-up discussion session. Therefore, they use the theatre space as a platform to express their views, their stories of struggles, and their particular campaigns. Thus, the article considers how these collaborative acts between theatre and refugee activists actually present their campaigns and experiences onstage. In doing so, the article aims to demonstrate the refugees' and asylum-seekers' performative resistance against invisibility, isolation and disconnectedness, which the German state imposed upon them through a legal requirement what was known as 'Residenzpflicht' until January 2015. According to this law, asylum-seekers in some federal district-states in Germany were not permitted to leave the district in which the *Ausländerbehörde* (immigration authorities office) at which they were registered. Although this law was amended in January 2015, at the time of my fieldwork this law was in effect. Furthermore, despite this amendment, the refugees remain isolated since the obligation to reside in a particular place continues to remain.

In many instances, the legal proceedings determining asylum cases can take several years. Asylum-seekers who failed to comply with 'Residenzpflicht', simply by travelling to visit friends and relatives in towns outside their jurisdictions were subject to heavy fines. Thus, many asylum-seekers in Germany experience alienation, since the asylum process could take several years to complete. These forms of inequalities can be best understood when forced migration and mobility is understood in terms of hidden inequalities so that the new global economic elites are able to cross borders at will, while the poor are meant to stay at home (Bauman 1998). This article

aims to demonstrate the ways in which the asylum-seekers aim to contest these forms of demonization within the realm of a theatrical space.

### **Re-locating the refugee**

This article demonstrates that refugees can be understood to resist the isolation imposed on them by the state since they connect and collaborate with a touring theatre team within Germany. Although the theatre travels to different cities and towns where refugees reside in their tightly controlled assigned areas of jurisdiction in ‘Lagers’ or ‘Heims’ (residential camps), their willingness to participate with the theatre demonstrate their resilience as they asserted their rights and used the theatre as a platform to inform the German society about their campaigns and initiatives. However, it is important to recognize that the theatre is not the sole vehicle through which asylum-seekers living in ‘Lagers’ protest about their current status. For example, in the year 2012, several refugees in Germany left their assigned jurisdictions located in Wurzburg, following the suicide of an asylum-seeker travelled for urban cities and set up a protest camp at a square in Berlin in the Green-Party district of Kreuzberg. In other instances, individual refugees defied these laws and travelled to neighbouring cities to participate in demonstrations such as in Munich. Although refugees’ engagement and collaboration with the theatre company do not always demonstrate overt defiance of these laws because in the majority of instances it is the theatre group that may travel to towns where refugees live, these collaborations nevertheless become significant because it is within these performative spaces that they are able to inform, educate, campaign, express their feelings and ultimately manifest their political agency in ways that other spaces may not allow them to do so.

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While the German state aims to physically isolate refugees and asylum-

seekers in distant towns, the media on a metaphorical level aims to further segregate refugees and asylum-seekers from German citizens. As Tyler (2013) notes, 'news media hate speech against asylum-seekers plays a crucial role in circulating the idea that asylum-seekers pose a threat to 'our' security and happiness'.

Europe has additionally seen the rise of the extreme-nationalism and the popularity of far-right parties such as the NPD in Germany, UKIP in England, and the Front National in France. These political factions continue to employ anti-immigrant rhetoric for their political gains, which has led to further divides between non-citizens/citizens and have resulted in anti-asylum seeking discourses- with 'false' claims and as an economic burden to the host society, which has fostered grounds for criminalizing and racializing refugees and forming a 'Fortress Europe' (e.g. van Dijk 1997; McDonald 2005; Krzyzanowski & Wodak 2009). However, as has been observed in the German context, refugees and their supporters have not accepted their fate in passive ways but rather have been extremely vocal in articulating the injustices they experience in Germany.

### **Refugee Activism**

There has been much attention given to forced migration within critical sociology. Forced migration has been understood as a consequence of the growing inequalities between the global North and the South. Castles (2003) contends that failed economies also means weak states, predatory ruling cliques and human rights abuse. He argues:

This leads to the notion of the 'asylum-migration nexus': many migrants and asylum-seekers have multiple reasons for mobility, and it is impossible to completely separate economic and human rights motivations-which is a challenge to the neat categories

that bureaucracies seek to impose (p. 2003, p.4). In this regard, the asylum-seekers who form part of this study can be understood to have arrived to Germany from differing nation-states because of a host of differing factors.

Sociological research on asylum-seekers has additionally been concerned with the growing 'stigmatization' of asylum-seekers and refugees. For example, Castles (2003) points out that forced migration has coincided with processes in the processes of economic restructuring, deindustrialisation, privatisation and deregulation from globalisation with the result that immigrants and asylum-seekers have been understood as a threat to jobs, living standards and welfare (p.7). This notion of asylum-seekers as the Other and a threat to the economy has been discussed extensively within scholarship pertaining to asylum-seekers (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Lutz et al. 1995; Solomos 1993; Vasta and Castles 1996; Wrench and Solomos 1993). The creation of 'human wastes' (such as asylum-seekers) has been understood to be a direct consequence of active formation of neoliberal states which emphasize individualism, choice, freedom, mobility and national security (Harvey 2005; Bauman 2004; Tyler 2013).

There has been further scholarly concern, which has attended to immigrants' and refugees' displays of agency countering this growing stigmatization and its consequences, particularly in the vein of recent immigrant protests and protest-camps, and every-day forms of resistance (e.g. Menjivar 2006; Galvez 2009; Cisneros 2011; Gonzales 2011; Rigby and Schiembach 2013; Milner 2011; Rygeil 2011; Tyler 2013; Author, 2014). These critical scholars understand refugees' political acts as 'acts of citizenship' in the face of the state's denial of formal citizenship.

Recent scholarship has additionally attended to the positive representations of refugees and immigrants within protests. These studies have discussed how refugees,

asylum-seekers, and solidarity activists have campaigned against unjust legislation and unfair living conditions of undocumented immigrants. These theoretical debates have offered ways of conceptualizing political agency of immigrants who don't hold formal citizenship rights in the nations in which they reside. In examining the processes and the challenging conditions that immigrants seek to contest state regulations, these studies highlight not only the political agency of the refugees, but also their participation in nation-states which penalize, reject, and denigrate their very presence within the countries in which they reside. Through their various campaigns for their continued rights to stay, asylum-seekers and refugees are defined and are assigned wider meanings which the state and the wider society refuses to acknowledge. In the absence of formal legal rights to participate in politics within the state, asylum-seekers and refugees have been understood as democratic cosmopolitans, so that 'denizens, migrants, residents, and their allies hold states accountable for their definitions and distributions of goods, powers, rights, freedoms, privileges, and justice' (Nyers, 2003: 1076).

While several scholars have demonstrated the ways in which refugees and non-status immigrants have attained visibility in protests, other scholars have attended to the idea of activism through the practices of hunger-strikes, self-mutilation, and lip-sewing (Tyler 2003; Puggoni 2014). In this regard the refugees' body comes to be understood as a site of politics.

There has also been much discussion of advocacy and solidarity efforts and the ways in which these groups interact and affect the images of the refugees themselves. For example, there has been much recent scholarly attention given to Noborder protest camps proximate to the squatter migrant camps in Calais. The studies demonstrated the ways in which this protest solidarity camp disrupted the

borders between citizens and non-citizens and the ways in which they served to transform the image of the migrant camp to that of a site of contestation (Rigby and Schiembach 2013; Milner 2011; Rygeil 2011). While these scholars demonstrate how advocacy groups interact and shape the images of refugees themselves, others have attended to the ways in which solidarity efforts aim to change the national discourse about refugees' belonging through the invocation of particular forms of memories (e.g. Kleist 2013). In this regard, Kleist conceptualizes the notion of belonging as that of belonging to a democratic polity, which could be either communal or civic (p. 669)

The idea of immigrant protests and political advocacy-such as organised opposition to government's refugee policies (Kleist 2009; 2013 Rygiel 2011), acts of citizenship of refugees and immigrants such as when 'immigrants engage in political, activist activities which enhance their sense of well-being in material, lived and symbolic ways even while their juridicial status remains unchanged' (Galvez 2010, p. 4) has been well attended to in the realm of demonstrations and protest-camps. However, a discussion of refugees' resistance and solidarity work has been less explored as a performative process in collaboration with cultural workers.

It becomes crucial to conceptualize refugees' performative acts as part of refugee politics since these acts aim to facilitate shifts in discourses about refugees as well as mobilise people into doing political actions. The refugees' criticisms and contestations of the German asylum policy and their expressions of their experiences of their homeland articulated in their own language onstage to a German audience needs to be understood as a process of 'political identity formation in exile' (Castles, p. 14). In doing so, the notion of refugees' political activism as the 'doer is then constructed through the deed itself' (Butler 1990, p. 142). Thus, non-citizens who are repeatedly denied visibility by the state, consequently attain voice in the cultural

arena. In this regard they help transform the theatre to a site of political activity. Butler contends that ‘performativity has everything do with ‘who’ can become produced as a recognizable subject, a subject who is living, whose life is worth sheltering and whose life, when lost would be worthy of mourning’ (Butler 2009, p. xii). Thus when individuals, when they contest precarity and become vocal, not only assert their agency, but also by interrupting the ‘normative scheme’ attain recognisability. In this way, they momentarily come to contest their ‘precarious lives.’ Precarious lives are those that do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable (Butler 2009, p. xiii). Thus, on-stage an asylum-seeker dispossessed of formal citizenship and the basic right to mobility, is able to reposition her/himself to the German audience through her/his performative agency. As Butler argues:

The subject who exercises freedom in this way is, in turn, defined by this very exercise, which is to say that the subject becomes a form of performative agency...such a subject breaks out of the established framework within which public politics proceeds, facilitating a certain crisis in the framework, posing anew the question of what can and cannot intelligibly take place within that framework (2010).

In this vein, the refugees in collaboration with the theatre company break themselves away from the ways in which they are positioned within dominant German society and articulate and convey themselves in novel ways. The refugee is positioned as an abject and victim of her/his circumstances in the minds of the German public, but onstage she/he is able to reposition her/himself to the audience through her/his speech and bodily gestures. Thus, the asylum-seekers who are often depicted as deceitful since the foreigners’ office rejects a sizeable percentage of asylum cases, gain credibility and disrupt certain frames through their speech acts within the spatiality of the theatre.

## **Methodology**

This article is based on an ethnographic study of a theatre-play *Die Asyl-Monologe*. The rationale for employing an ethnographic methodology was to provide an analysis of the self-presentation and political performances of refugees within the sphere of theatre. Interviews provided further insights into the broader context and helped me gain an understanding of the German and European asylum-policies. As O'Reilly (2012) contends ethnographic methodology, allows for the telling of rich, sensitive and credible stories when it involves direct and sustained contact with human beings over prolonged period of time. Similarly, Creswell (2003) suggests that a qualitative approach helps facilitate understanding meanings from the participants' point of view. More specifically O'Neill (2008) points out that ethnographic methodology helps transform dominant understandings and representations of sub-altern groups such as asylum seekers and refugees:

Ultimately biographical research counters the sanitized demonized or hidden aspects of the lived cultures of exile and belonging. In doing so, biography research helps to produce knowledge as a form of social justice (p.9)

Thus, I decided to employ an ethnographic approach, which involved touring with the theatre company and seeing multiple viewings of *Die Asyl-Dialoge*. More specifically, I saw seven viewings, of which three of the performances, I saw were based in Berlin at the Heimathafen-Neukölln theatre. The home theatre is located in Neukölln, a neighbourhood with a significant first and second-generation Turkish population as well immigrants from Palestine and other Arabic speaking nations. In addition to viewing the performances in Berlin, I saw another performance in Neubrandenburg at a University in the department of Social-Work. Additionally, I toured with the theatre team to towns such as Magdeburg and Potsdam where I also saw two more performances. Finally, I saw one performance at the refugees' protest camp at the Orange square in Berlin, which was held as part of their daily cultural

series 'Roses for Refugees.' I interviewed the director as well as the actors focusing collaborative practices within the theatre-the subject matter of this essay-and held informal conversations with refugees who participated during the discussion sessions at the theatre following the performance. The refugees who participated in the theatre included individual from Afghanistan, South Sudan, Mali, and Burkina Faso. I audio-recorded the performances. The refugees who spoke following the theatre performance varied with respect to their attainment of legal status. Many of the refugees were staying in their respective assigned area of jurisdiction since the theatre travelled to cities and towns where these 'Heims' were located. Some of the refugees were on Duldung status (toleration by the state), while others were waiting for their asylum-cases to be processed, and yet others were simply staying in Berlin and formed part of an on-going refugee movement. In order to gain insights into the performative acts of refugees in *Die Asyl-Monologe*, I selected to watch performances in Berlin as well as in towns and cities. Thus I acquired an understanding of how refugees living in the nearby Heims participated in the theatre. Therefore, I travelled with the theatre company to three towns located outside the capital city. The refugees spoke in English and French and translation was provided in German for the German speaking audience. I discovered very quickly that my Pakistani background facilitated a South-South dialogue with English speaking refugees particularly from nation-states such as Sudan and Nigeria.

### **The Stage for Human Rights**

A director, based in Berlin, Michael Ruf started a theatre company entitled Stage for Human Rights in the year 2012. This performance is known as verbatim-theatre or 'ethno-drama' (Saldana 2005) where as in this particular case, professional

actors narrate the actual experiences and perspectives of refugees in German onstage based on actual testimonies told to the interviewers who record their voices. However, the interviews were translated into German for the German-speaking audience. For the non-German speaking audience subtitles were provided in English, French and Turkish. There is minimum use of aesthetics within the entire performance. The lighting is mellow; the three German actors are dressed simply in jeans and shirts, stand and relate the testimonies of the refugees in an even voice without much dramatization. The actors take turns in relating different aspect of the refugees' narrative- the abstract, problematic events and resolution. The music performed tended to vary, but it included pieces such as Billy Holiday's 'Strange Fruit', a protest song in Arabic sung during the Arab Spring protests and some pieces of cello music. Thus, the music interspersed within the narrations, served as an interlude for the audience to reflect on the testimonies and further create the ambience for activist theatre. In this regard, *Die Asyl-Dialoge* could be regarded in Saldana's terms as an 'ethno-drama' which by collaborating with refugees and refugee activists help expose oppression and challenge the existing social order (Saldana 2005; 2011)

Following the actual performance by three professional actors, there were differing forms of discussion sessions with the audience, where the audience received the opportunity to interact with refugee supporters, human-rights lawyers, the refugees themselves, and human-rights groups such as the Amnesty International. Over the past three years, *Die Asyl-Monologe* had performed in several cities in Germany in various spaces such as schools, universities, churches, and cafes. Although there has been much representation and self-representation of refugees in the arts in forms such as music, literature and paintings with the goal of shifting discourses and representations about immigrants, this performance is unique because

of its collaboration with refugee activists and its three and a half long duration, that it can be understood to be very much contained within the broader politics of refugee activism within Germany. Thus, the refugee activists who form part of this political documentary theatre piece can be understood as political agents and the actors, the directors, and an intern can be understood to work in collaboration with the refugee activists in transposing refugee politics and in shifting the everyday understandings of refugees. For example, in 2014, in Manchester, UK a group of refugee women published a collection of testimonies about their experiences, and produced a theatre piece entitled, *How I became an Asylum Seeker* but these art forms could not be understood to be embedded within a particular refugee movement or activism in the same manner since the duration of these projects were limited and not on-going as in the case of *Die Asyl-Monologe*.

The political and performative agency of the refugee activist need to be underscored, since they accept invitations to be on stage and to interact with the audience. For example, when the theatre performed an excerpt of their piece at Oranienplatz as part of the 'Roses for Refugees' daily cultural events, one of the key activists of this protest campsite made a speech outlining the conditions of the asylum policy and their campaigns to challenge these conditions on the local level. The refugees did not understand themselves working in isolation, but rather in conjunction with differing cultural groups. These collaborations on the part of the refugee activism and theatre company could be understood through theoretical paradigms within classic social movement theory such as insurgent consciousness and resource mobilization (e.g. Jenkins 1983; McCarthy & Zaid 1977; Tilly 1978). However, seldom have these concepts been included in discussions within the context of refugee activism. In this sense, the collaboration between refugee activists and the theatre can

arguably be understood to adopt a radical turn. As one refugee activist explained to me that rather than negotiating with politicians and exclusively relying on demonstrations to get their demands heard, they considered it part of their strategy to form alliances with cultural workers and neighbourhood groups. 'If you start to dialogue with politicians, you just end up compromising and then they try to manipulate you. So our strategy is to work with cultural groups and neighbours and we hope that they will support our demands.' The following paragraphs provide further details of some of the actual performance and discussion sessions and the ways in which refugee activists enacted themselves during these sessions.

### **Performativity through the actors' voices**

The first part of *Die Asyl-Monologe* are performed by three professional actors who narrate the actual experiences of three refugees, Safiye from Turkey, Ali from Togo and Felleke from Ethiopia who currently live in Germany. These refugees were initially interviewed and the script of the theatre is based on their actual interviews.

As one of the actors, Asad carefully explained to me:

to use the word (for *Die Asyl-Monologe*) the word 'creation' is wrong. Because I checked it's a copy, it's a text, it's an experience of somebody who is still alive and even younger than me but just have another life experience. From the moment he gave this interview to Michael and we have it black and white, we read it as a text.

But we can't add something. You can't give your own personality inside. It's impossible to say what we want to say because we are just the voice of somebody else. I think for this project we need to be beware of making our own creations.

Because it's not our history we should be careful to consider their voice and our own voice. We can heighten or lighten the voices but can't say we are the refugees. We can't say we are the asylum-seekers.

Excerpts of testimonies of Safiye, Ali, and Felleke who sought asylum in Germany because of persecution in the public sphere in their respective states can be characterized as political resistance of German asylum policies as well as expressions of collaborations with aspects of German society who are sympathetic to the refugee movement. For example, Safiye expressed her resistance when upon losing her asylum case the first time, preservers to appeal, wins, and raises a family in Berlin. Felleke actively resisted deportation to Ethiopia with the support of an active campaign. The testimonies did not simply reveal their challenging experiences limited to their countries of origin, but they demonstrated how the three individuals contested the bureaucracies of the asylum-seeking process within Germany, the limitations on their movements and the sub-standard housing arrangements for asylum-seekers. Butler (1997) forcefully critiques the notion of subjecthood and understands performativity as a renewable action without clear origin or end. She suggests that speech is finally constrained neither by its specific speaker nor its originating context. She argues, ‘not only defined by social context, such speech is also marked by its capacity to break with context’ (p. 40, 1997).

Therefore, the refugees’ voices performed through the bodies of actors can be understood as a form of resistance against tropes of victimhood and suffering. The testimonies break away from their original contexts such as prisons, detention centres, Lagers, and the foreigners’ office. Furthermore, these testimonies serve to subvert the very basis of the refugees’ identity itself and aim to mobilize the audience into action.

Testimonies have been understood as problematic because it transposes humans into victims calling attention to suffering rather than interrogating questions of power (e.g. Tyler 2006; Fassin 2005; Malkki 1996; Millner 2011). But these testimonies, which focus on inverting discourses regarding asylum-seekers can be

understood in Butler's terms 'in which agency is derived from injury, and injury countered through that very derivation' (p.41, 1997). The following excerpts of the three individuals who provide accounts of their experiences of their asylum-seeking process through the actors demonstrate this point of view. In the following instances, the asylum-seekers speak of their experiences. Safiye and Felleke provide accounts of their experiences with their interviewers from the Ausländerbehörde. Ali provides his experience with a doctor in Germany.

Safiye: I told my story and she was on the phone. She phoned the whole time. If she'd been really interested, she would have tried to understand from my facial expressions and my mimic, whether I really experienced it or not. I think the interview took 4 to 5 hours. The interviewer was very unfriendly. She conveyed to me "What are you doing here? You caused extra work for me. You won't get what you want anyways."

Felleke: Nearly all interviewers follow the same strategy. They intentionally try to mess up the minds of refugees in order to make them fail. For all of my life I had dealt with decent human beings. And then for the first time I was standing in front of this man spitting and beating the table with his fists.

Ali: I had an examination of the lungs at the hospital. Electrodes were fixed everywhere. A doctor asked me whether I was smoking or drinking alcohol, but I declined. Then he asked what kind of problem I had. Nothing but the asylum-problem, I answered.

These voices of the refugee activists, within the setting of the documentary theatre, clearly show they struggle to invert Butler's notion of 'injurious' language that interviewers at the Ausländerbehörde directs towards asylum-seekers. By recounting and performing the very interview questions and a doctor's evaluation, the refugees through their performative acts become activists before an audience at a well-known theatre space in Berlin. Thus, the experience of the refugees with the doctor and the interviewers break away from their actual frames and context, embodying new meanings within new spatialities.

Thus, these narratives demonstrate that refugee activism can be comprehended through performative acts as well, since these acts actually disrupt the public sphere - so that the logic of the binaries of exclusion/inclusion, which the nation-states impose upon immigrants and refugees, become contested (e.g. Tyler 2013; Nyers 2006).

The merging of the voices of citizens and non-citizens, the inclusion of refugees on-stage during follow-up discussions, the particular narratives of refugee activists, the ideological position of the theatre team, the different formats of the post-performance discussions, the spaces –outside the bounds of formal cultural venues-in which many of the performances take place are some of the elements of this documentary theatre that lends to these ‘repeated disturbances between formal theatre and political action’ (Isin & Nielsen 2008). In this regard, performance art not only becomes part of a larger political movement for refugees’ rights, but that the refugees’ voices together with the actors’ voices become intrinsically a collaborative political movement, where the voices of refugee activists manifest political expressions and the voices of the theatre team express solidarity with the wider refugee movement.

What is also important here is to consider, that refugees engage in a dialogue between the actors and the audience so that the political agency of refugees are reinforced such that the individual testimonies adopt a collective tone and they ultimately have an impact on the audience even to a sympathetic audience. As an intern working at the theatre told me in one town in Bremen, the audience spontaneously formed a refugee action group following the theatre performance. But these political acts of refugees do not occur in a vacuum, but in conjunction with the actors and the theatre team who let such voices manifest themselves. In this manner, the frame within these divergent voices occur can be understood to be a form of a

solidarity between the spectators, actors, the director and refugee activists.

### **Refugee Activists and the Discussion Sessions**

Following the 90 minute performance of testimonies of asylum-seekers, that were related by three actors, the stage came to be transformed to what might be easily construed as a ‘political event’ comprising of refugee led activists and members of the German society sympathetic to the cause of rights from refugees. It becomes useful to consider Butler’s notion of ‘repetition’ and ‘iteration’ in this context. The actors convey the actual testimonies of the refugees, but these testimonies are reinforced, repeated, and re-iterated on stage by the bodies of actual refugees. When refugee activists and the theatre team cooperate, various power dynamics are reshaped since the refugees speak to the audience in their own voices and languages and their performatives further help construct different layers of meanings.

Jeffers (2012) suggests that theatrical performances about refugees’ stories becomes spaces of hospitality for refugees and that the ‘offer of hospitable stage’ on which refugee stories can be re-enacted is just that, a stage, not substantial, not ‘real’. However, the refugee activists’ actual presence and voices on stage reframes the stage into a significant and concrete site of insurgent politics where refugees through their very presence aim to engage in a dialogue with the audience and create ruptures with respect to discourses about what it means to be a refugee in Germany. This is especially true when refugees who are particularly active in various campaigns speak to the audience. For example, in the following interaction with the audience, Nurjana Ismailova, a refugee activist gave the following account:

For three years I am with Youth Without Borders, an initiative for young refugees in Germany. We do conferences and speak to the press. We also fought for the minister who deports the most and that minister is now fighting a lawsuit. We came to Germany five years ago and we lived in three different asylum homes. First in

Braunschweig and then in two other towns. We were the only family who didn't want to do it. And in the morning the police came and gave us three hours to pack our stuff. I was in the refugee home and I felt I could not live there. I asked for some numbers of human rights organizations and I got the number of this refugee council. We meet at demonstrations and press conferences with the Green Party. So the foreign office found out about it. They sued us for that. The police also came to our house and took our stuff. Took our phones and laptop. In this laptop they found a picture of me in Berlin without having a permit to come here. So they sued because I didn't follow the rules. But they didn't get anything from that suing. But then my parents came to the federal foreign office and they were very aggressive there. But we still kept on fighting.

In this account, Nurjana presents herself not only as a refugee in Germany, but as an activist involved in working for the rights of refugees –such as the rights of young refugees. Subsequently, she speaks of her own experiences -but rather than presenting herself as a victim of circumstances, she speaks of the ways in which she continued to claim her rights. In so doing, her very own presentation of self, following the performance, does not only serve to reinforce the earlier accounts of refugees in Germany, but also serves to create a juncture where 'performance art and politics become intertwined and the boundaries between them become disrupted' (Isin & Nielsen 2008). Moreover, the issues she speaks about take on a collective meaning because these matters are not only pertinent to Nurjana, but rather they affect asylum-seekers in general. In this way her voice is that of an activist. On-stage, Nurjana was also accompanied by a human rights lawyer as well as the director of the performance who engaged in a Q&A with her in conjunction with the audience. But her voice similar to the voices of the refugees during the performance remained foregrounded. It was not subsumed by the human rights lawyer's voice or the director's voice but rather there occurred a dialogue between them as the director and members of the audience asked her several questions. In this way, while the state

delegitimizes and disqualifies the testimonies of the refugees, Nurjana's actual presence in the public can be understood as acts of contestations, which defy these characterizations. In sum, Nurjana's presence and similarly the presence of different refugee activists in the public can be best understood as a form of sustained political movement which differ from the expressions of refugees in hunger strikes, demonstrations, rallies, (e.g. Tyler 2013; Puggoni 2014). However, her performative actions create ruptures in the conditions of asylum-seekers and refugees in Germany. Although the German asylum law of *Residenzpflicht* was instrumental in injuring Nurjana and her family's sense of well being, but she refused to be paralyzed by it and countered the 'offensive call', producing several responses and actions (Butler 1997). In this regard, her articulations onstage further serve to reiterate and reinforce her prior actions-but this time onstage. O'Neill (2008) asserts in writing about the transformative role of art, that by 'performing narratives of subjectivities, lives and experiences become central to better understand our social world' (p. 20). However, in the case of refugee activists who perform onstage, their enactments of their political identities in collaboration with cultural workers not only help in understanding their social world but also enables in transforming their social image and positioning.

Similarly, following another theatre performance in Berlin, a refugee activist, Asem from Sudan from the refugee protest group, 'Berlin-Refugee-Strike' came forward to speak to the audience about an on-going preparation for a refugee protest march from Strasbourg to Brussels the date of the start of the march 20 May was to coincide with the European elections.

Ruf: Could you please tell us about the Berlin-Refugee-Strike

Asem: The movement had started almost two years ago. It was responsible for campaigning against the movement restriction. And from which the Oranienplatz

started. And we set up tents in Oranienplatz and we have been fighting since then. It was a refugee-led movement.

Ruf: Could you please tell us about the march?

Asem: I've been in Germany for 6 years. I have been affected by Dublin case. Two years ago I was in another country. My best friend came to Germany and he said he was participating in a demonstration against the German and European asylum laws. When I arrived to Berlin there was a demonstration. There were a lot of people and a lot of police. I was in the middle of a lot of people in Berlin. People were chanting, 'We are here. We will fight. Freedom of movement is everybody's right.' I then got involved in organizing the march from Strasburg to Brussels. I have been in all these countries organizing demonstration, Greece, Belgium, Italy, France, Denmark. I am in the logistic group here. And I said, 'Okay, I will now organize a march here.' The idea of the march is to start around 20<sup>th</sup> of May around the European elections. And to continue marching for 29 days. Some of the interior ministers of the EU will meet in Brussels around that time. We will speak of freedom of movement for refugees, recognition of refugee rights, and to stop criminalising refugees and to speak of laws of in countries that kills us which forces refugees to go to other countries. The idea of the march came by connecting with people in different countries in Europe. We meet at Kotti Café every Sunday afternoon and you can get more information. We are expecting about 300 to 500 people to participate in the march.

Castles (2003) contends that at one stage the task of sociology of forced migration was concerned with the study of people forced to flee from one society to become part of another. He argues that globalisation and transnationalism make this conceptualisation anachronistic, since the boundaries of national societies are becoming increasingly blurred. In this regard, Asem's onstage performative campaigning of a forthcoming European political march demonstrates his connections to differing European nation-states as well as his continued concerns with the situation in the Global South. Thus, the refugee's identity in the host nation needs to be understood as being consequential of local and global asylum politics. Furthermore, it becomes important to acknowledge that refugees do not accept their position in their host nation in passive ways but rather they engage in 'counter-speech.' As Butler notes:

The interval between instances of utterances not makes the repetition and resignification of the utterance possible, but shows how words might through time, become disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes (p. 15, 1997).

Additionally, Asem's onstage appearance with Ruf, with Asad an actor, and a human rights lawyer constituted a collaborative frame for the German audience who through raising questions became part of this frame. Furthermore, this collaborative framework reinforced not only the notion of authentic theatre but additionally helped create an arena for 'doing' political activism. In this sense, the activist identity of the refugee is revealed in the public sphere in a manner that the collective nature of demonstrations would not necessarily allow. This does not necessarily undermine the collective power of refugee activism, but rather for refugees whose identities are subject to constant denunciations, these performative aspects of activism help them acquire an even more visible agentive personhood. The German state immobilizes refugees physically by housing them in 'Lagers', in remote towns and become instrumental in imprinting demonized images on the minds of German consciousness, but refugee activists discover ways to continually resist these fixed ways of being.

Whereas Asem's collaboration with the theatre allowed him to campaign for a forthcoming march, in other instances refugees' engagements with the theatre allowed them to tell their narratives of their past experiences. As Jeffers (2014) has noted that the telling of testimonies for refugees and asylum-seekers in the context of theatre becomes consequential since in many instances they desire an audience who is willing to listen to them because in so many situations their voices become silenced. When I met Maqbool a refugee from Afghanistan, from an organization called 'Welcome2Europe', outside the theatre, he briefly introduced himself to me and mentioned to me that he had spent some time in Pakistan where he had learned to

speak Urdu and play cricket. He also told me that his mother was still in Peshawar, Pakistan. Onstage, he related a rather lengthy and detailed story about his arduous journey from Pakistan to Germany:

Maqbool: Yeah, it all began with the NATO occupation in Afghanistan. My family was not feeling safe so we decided to leave and somehow we were pushed by foreign troops to leave the country. So we went to Pakistan. As everyone knows that Pakistan is not safe. Kind of like the same situation like Afghanistan. My mother also thought that I should leave the country and obviously she thought that I wasn't safe in the country. I also said, 'okay' then I will leave the country. I came from Pakistan to Iran and then to Turkey. Quite difficult to cross the borders, and not to have the legal papers. Sometimes 48 hours without food and water. Being afraid of being shot in the borders or being sent back to the back to the borders. Anyway, after months I made it to Istanbul.

In this manner, Maqbool continued to tell his story of his difficult journey to Germany. Maqbool's articulation of past experience can be understood as him forming and maintaining some link with his country of origin. Furthermore, Maqbool's narrative clearly demonstrates how his migration was a direct consequence of stratified North-South relations such as the NATO war. Thus the very notion of the refugee movement to an 'autonomous national society' becomes destabilised: the migration process needs to be understood in terms of North-South relations (Castles 2003). In his interaction with the audience, Maqbool articulated that refugees even without formal citizenship can contest state borders at differing levels. However, it is this very exercise that enabled Maqbool to break away from the discourse of a 'victim' to a survivor to a 'supporter' since he speaks of helping other refugees. Butler (2009) notes referring to Hannah Arendt that when stateless people engage in certain actions in the public, 'the right to have rights' becomes a performative exercise and that freedom comes into being through its exercise. In this regard, when

refugees perform their testimonies to the audience, their rights to have the rights to address a German audience in the public sphere becomes an emancipatory act.

The collaborations, connections, and intimacies between the theatre team, members of the audience, researchers and the refugee activists could be understood to adopt varying dimensions. On one level, the collaborative framework could be understood in formal terms, where a refugee enters into an agreement with the theatre to participate in the public sphere but on another level, the alliances occur on a platform where refugee and members of the audience as well as in some instances members of the theatre team may interact on more informal terms. However, it is important to recognize that the theatre team did not simply ‘host’ the refugees since they themselves appeared to fully comprehend the momentum of refugee politics. Because the team aligned very closely to the local refugee activism, the collaborations, which occur between the theatre’s core team could not be simply understood in terms of Derrida’s (2000) notion of ‘hospitality’ –laden with conditions. Derrida asks, ‘Must we ask the foreigners to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible exclusions, and so as to be able to welcome him into our country?’ (p.15). In fact, these onstage and off-stage collaborations subverted the notion of conditional ‘hospitality’, which the German state demonstrates towards asylum-seekers- since onstage the refugees expressed their viewpoints freely and in their language of choice with the audience, with cultural workers, and NGO workers in the language of their choice --with some degree of moderation.

### **Refugee activists and the local context**

While Maqbool and Asem expressed their narratives in Berlin within the space of a theatre, which accommodated about a hundred people, there were other refugee

activists who spoke about specific local issues when *Die Asyl-Monologe* performed outside Berlin. For example, during the discussion session in Neubrandenburg, several of the refugees onstage and offstage spoke of racial profiling with much emotion. In one instance, a refugee who was a member of the audience exchanged seats with a refugee who was onstage. As one of the refugees explained to the audience:

I have been in Europe for 20 years. Whenever I take the bus I always have to show my license. Just because of my colour I have to show my license. When I go to the train station I have to show my license. I feel that I get controlled in every corner. I feel angry about this situation. Last Saturday I said to the police, 'I'm not going to show you my license.'

These expressions did not go unheard and one of the German activists onstage told the refugee rather helpfully about an organization called, 'logging' where incidents about victims of racial violence could be logged and documented. She also further explained that they document about experiences of people who have suffered from racial violence from the far right party, NPD in Germany.

Following this account, there was another speaker from the audience who actually joined the people on the stage to share his experience and viewpoint with regard to racial profiling in Neubrandenburg. He spoke to the audience in a loud, expressive, and theatrical manner:

The police do not control German people. They don't control white people. They come straight to foreigners. Because we are the criminals. Because if you go to Africa you see a lot of Europeans. We give them respect. I don't understand why they don't respect us. I don't know why. I'm not anti-Europe. In Africa we welcome. We welcome. But they control us here. I say that all police are racist here.

At this point, a white German man from the audience questioned him if the police controlled him because he didn't have any legal rights to be in Germany or was it because he was a foreigner. He responded to this question by stating that they don't

bother citizens. He commented, 'Straight foreigner. It's not about citizens. Only foreigners.'

In this way, the discussion about racial profiling, which included targeting foreigners, asylum-seekers, immigrants, individuals of colour, as well as about restricted spaces within 'Lagers' for refugees continued onstage. At this juncture, the moderator, observed out loud, 'normally the questions are addressed from the audience to the podium, but tonight since the questions are being addressed from the podium to the audience, the audience should get a chance to respond to them.' This particular comment by the moderator further signified the shift in power relations between the refugee and the German audience and the theatre space. Butler contends that acts of transgressions not only occur within speech acts, but rather that these acts break from their social norms (1997). The improvised turn during the discussion sessions arguably invoked a crisis in the established frame of the meaning of a refugee. Furthermore, the refugees in this particular instance did not follow the traditional format, since refugees who were members of the audience got on the stage. Consequently, their presence onstage allowed them to control the direction of the discussion, ask questions to the German audience, express their experiences of polarization within the German state, make comparisons between the experience of 'foreigners' in Africa and Europe and ultimately demonstrate their political agency during the discussion session leaving Ruf with the challenge on how best to direct the flow of interaction.

Thus, the refugees were in a position to claim their space and to momentarily cast off their stigmatized and static positions as 'foreigners without formal status' as 'asylum-seekers' as 'racialized Africans' on that particular evening in the University's auditorium in the department of Social-Work and elsewhere as they

challenged the German audience and continued with their discussions for well over an hour. But the refugees did not voice their perspectives in isolation. Interspersed within their accounts of police control were discussion of topics such as the issue of translations of forms in German, miscommunication amongst refugees and overcrowded 'Lagers'. However, the topic of racism and thereby the performativity of refugees as activists, remained foregrounded since the refugees present in the auditorium and on the stage found it difficult to leave this issue, since it seemingly affected their lives. In this sense, the refugees' voices conveyed performative agency, because not only did they contest racism, but they also challenged the bureaucracy of theatre since they defied the traditional format where the moderator/director had the ultimate power to govern the onstage conversations.

It is important to understand the specificities of the different problems and issues that the refugees experience depending on the towns they resided within. For example, in a town such as Magdeburg, which was bigger and more liberal with a University with more international students, the two French speaking refugees from Niger and Burkina Faso, who had been living in the area for several years in the local 'Lagers' did not bring forth the issue of racism, but rather spoke about issues such as isolation, language barriers, the lack of adequate medical resources, and ultimately the challenge of filling in time in the absence of a work permit:

We don't want to become dependent on welfare. If you want to work you need to apply for documents. And this application is very hard to do. And again the language is the main barrier. You come to country where you don't speak the language. And if you get to go to the language course, it's only once or twice a week and it doesn't change much.

Thus, in this way the refugee repositions himself on the stage for human rights.

Within the dominant German society, the refugee is understood as an alien and but

onstage the refugee exhibits his willingness to integrate by displaying his willingness to work and learn the language. Scholars have noted that in several protests and demonstrations, asylum-seekers and their supporters have called attention to similar concerns (Menjivar 2006; Galvez 2009; Cisneros 2011; Gonzales 2011; Rigby and Schiembach 2013; Milner 2011; Rygeil 2011; Tyler 2013; Author, 2014). However, onstage in alliance with a German director and actors, while speaking to German and international students within the context of a University, these words become even more forceful. The refugee is in an elevated position and standing while the audience is seated below. Furthermore, the refugee refrains from being a spectacle for the audience, since he is actually present during the theatre, voicing his concerns and dilemmas.

Hence the collaboration between the refugee activists and the theatre needs to be understood in dynamic ways since the above accounts demonstrate that refugee activists differed considerably in the ways in which they expressed themselves on stage. However, what is significant here is that through their very presence and their expressions, they managed to, within this liminal space, momentarily subvert and resist the very laws that the German state imposes upon them. In such a situation, the German audience understands the refugees to be disconnected, victimized, and disengaged. But within the space of the theatre, through exercising their rights to speak within a public sphere, the refugees' imposed identities fade since the German audience see the refugee as a social actor who is well connected and active. In this sense, Butler's (2010) argument of the subject becoming a form of performative agency when such a subject breaks out of the established framework becomes useful. Moreover, these links and connections occur on a face-to-face level rather than in virtual space or a collective sphere such as in demonstrations and protests where it is

still possible to maintain some distance. In this way, the audience is not allowed to simply demonstrate 'distant compassion' (Boltanski 1999) but rather they are encouraged to engage and self-reflect about local injustices and activism within their own vicinities.

These performative aspects of the refugee activists become additionally significant because of its temporal dimensions, which has not been addressed in the scholarship of immigrant activism. During the actual performance, the actors relate the stories of three refugees who were interviewed three years ago and their narratives invoked past memories of three refugees. However, the refugees speak of current and topical issues. In this regard, the narratives of the refugees help achieve political continuities between historical accounts and current accounts. Kleist (2013) implies that memories can be politically contested, 'both for their interpretation of the past and their consequences in the present' (p.669). For the German audience, the theatre is transposed from a space where they hear a narration of performed political memories of refugees to a site of contestation, where they witness certain actions in the present, and where the refugees themselves are proactive in staging their own circumstance and future course of action towards change. In this way the refugees further help establish authenticity for the German audience.

### **Concluding Comments**

The sociology of forced migration and asylum have been concerned about the causes, the formation of identities, and more recently the political activism of asylum-seekers, refugees, and immigrants. Castels argues that since the 1990s there has been 'a politicisation of migration and asylum, marked by heated public debates and competition between the parties to be toughest on 'illegals'. This article demonstrated refugees' aim to socially transform and contest such debates and discourses. The

refugees arguably perform their political agency onstage as they speak of their various struggles and campaigns to counter the injustices they encounter.

While scholars recognize refugees and immigrants as political subjects and political actors in the context of rallies, protest-camps, and demonstrations, the idea of refugee activists as creating disturbances and articulating their own positions is less discussed in the context of performance art. In considering refugees as political and cultural activists and actors and cultural workers as supportive interventionists within the realm of theatre allows considerations of differing forms of political expressions and solidarity and advocacy work in the public sphere. The refugee activists, the actors by virtue of performing in differing spaces, using differing formats, inviting and being invited by refugee activists, and contesting state power in the testimonies, invoke a paradox where the performances translates into political action and art simultaneously.

Performance art not only becomes part of a larger political movement for refugees' rights, but that the refugees' voices together with the actors' voices become intrinsically a collaborative political movement, where the voices of refugee activists manifest political expressions and the voices of the theatre team express solidarity within the wider refugee movement. This form of collaboration became even more visible when actual refugees came and spoke to the audience in the second part of the event.

Refugees through their willingness to collaborate with this theatre team, who performed and conveyed their narrative of suffering, hope, resilience, and everyday living, ultimately come to reposition themselves through their speech acts and

performative acts. As O'Neill (2008) notes that through this collaborative process with cultural workers, refugees and asylum-seekers find the ways and means of representing her story. Thus, in this manner, the refugees destabilized the categories of 'refugees' and 'asylum-seekers' while they presented themselves as activists, as human-beings, and ultimately as survivors of Germany's and Europe's difficult asylum-policies.

In this regard, it becomes significant to consider the notion of performativity in the context of theatre within the spectrum of refugee activism. While scholars who have attended to everyday modes of resistance and collective political acts of refugees and immigrant activists speak of belonging, citizenship, and the freedom of exercising rights, less has been discussed how alternative spaces such as the theatre may lend to similar ways of being for stateless people. Furthermore, it is in the context of theatre that the performative aspects gain prominence in ways that protests and activism in camps may not allow. Within the space of theatre, the refugee can elect to 'talk back' 'embody' 'parody' or simply 'retell' their experiences. In doing, so it's in the very 'doing' of these actions that the refugee is able to contest assumed representations and become an activist figure. In this regard, refugee political activism needs to be understood in terms of 'doing activism' as the figure of a refugee activist is performatively constituted for the audience. Thus, the refugee is able to subvert and counter certain assumptions about being a refugee in the global North.

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