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Collaborations and Performative Agency in Refugee Theater in Germany

FAZILA BHIMJI

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- Q3.** Au: What “this” refers to is unclear (In “This leads to the notion ...”).
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- Q43.** Au: For Saldana 2012, publisher location missing.
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Germany**

Fazila Bhimji

ARTICLES

Collaborations and Performative Agency in Refugee Theater in Germany

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The article contributes to an understanding of the formation of political identities of asylum seekers within the context of theater 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 from the viewing of seven performances in Germany of refugee activists from the global South as well as from interviews with the theater team.

KEYWORDS *refugees, performative agency, activist theater, collaboration, Germany*

There has been a wave of activism for refugee rights in the past 2 years in Q1 Germany. A theater production, *Die Asyl-Monologe*, running for 3 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

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31 doing so, the aim of the article is to highlight and examine the performative 32
agency of refugees.

33 Refugees form alliances with the theater in two main ways: firstly, by 34 lending their
stories to the theater in the form of in-depth interviews, which 35 is then related in the
form of verbatim theater by professional actors, and 36 secondly, by participating in the
follow-up discussion session. Therefore, 37 they use the theater space as a platform to
express their views, their sto38 ries of struggles, and their particular campaigns. Thus, the
article considers 39 how these collaborative acts between theater and refugee activists
actually 40 present their campaigns and experiences on stage. In doing so, the article 41
aims to demonstrate the refugees' and asylum seekers' performative resis42 tance against
invisibility, isolation, and disconnectedness, which the German 43 state imposed upon
them through a legal requirement, known as "Residen44 zpflicht," until January 2015.
According to this law, asylum seekers in some 45 federal district-states in Germany were
not permitted to leave the district in 46 which the Auslanderbeh" orde (immigration
authorities office) at which they" 47 registered was located. Although this law was amended
in January 2015, at 48 the time of my fieldwork this law was in effect. Furthermore, despite
this 49 amendment, the refugees remain isolated since the obligation to reside in a 50
particular place continues to remain.

51 In many instances, the legal proceedings determining asylum cases can 52 take several
years. Asylum seekers who failed to comply with "Residen53 zpflicht" simply by travelling
to visit friends and relatives in towns outside 54 their jurisdictions were subject to heavy
fines. Thus, many asylum seekers in 55 Germany experience alienation, since the asylum
process could take several 56 years to complete. These forms of inequalities can be best
understood when 57 forced migration and mobility is understood in terms of hidden
inequalities 58 wherein the new global economic elites are able to cross borders at will 59
while the poor are meant to stay at home (Bauman, 1998). This article aims 60 to
demonstrate the ways in which the asylum seekers aim to contest these 61 forms of
demonization within the realm of a theatrical space.

62

RELOCATING THE REFUGEE

63 This article demonstrates that refugees can be understood to resist the isola64 tion
imposed on them by the state since they connect and collaborate with a 65 touring theater
team within Germany. Although the theater travels to different 66 cities and towns, where
refugees reside in their tightly controlled assigned 67 areas of jurisdiction in "Lagers" or
"Heims" (residential camps), their will68 ingness to participate with the theater
demonstrated their resilience as they 69 asserted their rights and used the theater as a
platform to inform the German 70 society about their campaigns and initiatives. However,
it is important to rec71 ognize that the theater is not the sole vehicle through which asylum
seekers

72 living in “Lagers” protest about their current status. For example, in the year
73 2012, several refugees in Germany left their assigned jurisdictions located in
74 Wurzburg—following the suicide of an asylum seeker—travelled to urban
75 cities and set up a protest camp at a square in Berlin in the Green Party
76 district of Kreuzberg. In other instances, individual refugees defied these
77 laws and travelled to neighboring cities to participate in demonstrations,
78 such as in Munich. Although refugees’ engagement and collaboration with
79 the theater company do not always demonstrate overt defiance of these laws
80 because in the majority of instances it is the theater group that may travel
81 to towns where refugees live, these collaborations nevertheless become sig-
82 nificant because it is within these performative spaces that they are able to
83 inform, educate, campaign, express their feelings, and ultimately manifest
84 their political agency in ways that other spaces may not allow.

85 While the German state aims to physically isolate refugees and asylum
86 seekers in distant towns, the media on a metaphorical level aims to further
87 segregate refugees and asylum seekers from German citizens. As Tyler (2013)
88 notes, “News media hate speech against asylum seekers plays a crucial role
89 in circulating the idea that asylum seekers pose a threat to ‘our’ security and
90 happiness.”

91 Europe has additionally seen the rise of extreme nationalism and the
92 popularity of far-right parties such as the NPD in Germany, UKIP in Eng-
93 land, and the Front National in France. These political factions continue to
94 employ anti-immigrant rhetoric for their political gains, which has led to
95 further divides between noncitizens/citizens and has resulted in anti-asylum
96 seeking discourses making “false” claims and portraying asylum seekers as
97 an economic burden to the host society, which has fostered grounds for

Q2

4

F. Bhimji

98 criminalizing and racializing refugees and forming a “Fortress Europe” (e.g.,
99 Krzyzanowski & Wodak, 2009; McDonald, 2005; van Dijk, 1997). However,
100 as has been observed in the German context, refugees and their supporters
101 have not accepted their fate in passive ways but rather have been extremely
102 vocal in articulating the injustices they experience in Germany.

103

REFUGEE ACTIVISM

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

109 This leads to the notion of the “asylum-migration nexus”: many migrants
110 and asylum seekers have multiple reasons for mobility, and it is impos-
111 sible to completely separate economic and human rights motivations,
112 which is a challenge to the neat categories that bureaucracies seek to im113 pose (p.
2003, p. 4). In this regard, the asylum seekers who form part of 114 this study can be
understood to have arrived to Germany from differing 115 nation-states because of a
host of differing factors.

Q3

116 Sociological research on asylum seekers has additionally been con117 cerned with the
growing “stigmatization” of asylum seekers and refugees. 118 For example, Castles (2003)
points out that forced migration has coincided
119 with processes in the processes of economic restructuring, deindustrializa-

Q4

120 tion, privatization, and deregulation from globalization with the result that 121
immigrants and asylum seekers have been understood as a threat to jobs, 122 living
standards, and welfare (p. 7). This notion of asylum seekers as the 123 Other and as a threat
to the economy has been discussed extensively within 124 scholarship pertaining to asylum
seekers (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991; Lutz, 125 Phoenix, & Yuval-Davis, 1995; Solomos,
1993; Vasta & Castles, 1996; Wrench 126 & Solomos, 1993). The creation of “human
wastes” (such as asylum seekers) 127 has been understood to be a direct consequence of
active formation of ne128oliberal states that emphasize individualism, choice, freedom,
mobility, and 129 national security (Bauman, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Tyler, 2013).

130 There has been further scholarly concern, which has attended to im131 migrants' and
refugees' displays of agency countering this growing stigma132 tization and its
consequences, particularly in the vein of recent immigrant

133 protests and protest camps and in everyday forms of resistance (e.g., Bhimji,

Q5 134 2014; Cisneros 2011; Gonzales 2011; Galvez 2009; Rigby & Schiembach, 2013; 135
Menjivar, 2006; Milner, 2011; Rygeil, 2011; Tyler, 2013). These critical schol136 ars
understand refugees' political acts as "acts of citizenship" in the face of 137 the state's denial
of formal citizenship.

138 Recent scholarship has additionally attended to the positive repre139 sentations of
refugees and immigrants within protests. These studies have 140 discussed how refugees,
asylum seekers, and solidarity activists have cam141 paigned against unjust legislation and
unfair living conditions of undocu142 mented immigrants. These theoretical debates have
offered ways of concep143 tualizing the political agency of immigrants who don't hold
formal citizenship 144 rights in the nations in which they reside. In examining the processes
and 145 the challenging conditions about which immigrants seek to contest state reg146
ulations, these studies highlight not only the political agency of the refugees 147 but also
their participation in nation-states that penalize, reject, and deni148 grate their very presence
within the countries in which they reside. Through 149 their various campaigns for their
continued rights to stay, asylum seekers 150 and refugees are defined and are assigned wider
meanings that the state and 151 the wider society refuses to acknowledge. In the absence of
formal legal 152 rights to participate in politics within the state, asylum seekers and refugees
153 have been understood as democratic cosmopolitans, such that "denizens, mi154 grants,
residents, and their allies hold states accountable for their definitions 155 and
distributions of goods, powers, rights, freedoms, privileges, and justice" 156 (Nyers,
2003, p. 1076).

157 While several scholars have demonstrated the ways in which refugees

158 and nonstatus immigrants have attained visibility in protests, other scholars 159
have attended to the idea of activism through the practices of hunger strikes, 160
self-mutilation, and lip-sewing (Puggoni, 2014; Tyler, 2003). In this regard 161
the refugees' body comes to be understood as a site of politics.

162 There has also been much discussion of advocacy and solidarity efforts

163 and the ways in which these groups interact and affect the images of the

164 refugees themselves. For example, there has been much recent scholarly

165 attention given to Noborder protest camps proximal to the squatter migrant

166 camps in Calais. The studies demonstrated the ways in which this protest

167 solidarity camp disrupted the borders between citizens and noncitizens and

168 the ways in which they served to transform the image of the migrant camp

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169 to that of a site of contestation (Milner, 2011; Rigby & Schiembach 2013;
170 Rygeil, 2011). While these scholars demonstrate how advocacy groups inter-
171 act and shape the images of refugees themselves, others have attended to the
172 ways in which solidarity efforts aim to change the national discourse about
173 refugees' belonging through the invocation of particular forms of memories
174 (e.g., Kleist, 2013). In this regard, Kleist conceptualizes the notion of be-
175 longing as that of belonging to a democratic polity, which could be either
176 communal or civic (p. 669).

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

186 It becomes crucial to conceptualize refugees' performative acts as part
187 of refugee politics since these acts aim to facilitate shifts in discourses about
188 refugees as well as mobilize people to take political action. The refugees' crit-
189 icisms and contestations of the German asylum policy and their expressions
190 of their experiences of their homeland articulated in their own language on
191 stage to a German audience needs to be understood as a process of "polit-
192 ical identity formation in exile" (Castles, p. 14). In doing so, the notion of
193 refugees' political activism as the "doer is then constructed through the deed
194 itself" (Butler, 1990, p. 142). Thus, noncitizens who are repeatedly denied
195 visibility by the state, consequently, attain voice in the cultural arena. In this
196 regard they help transform the theater into a site of political activity. Butler

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197 contends that “performativity has everything do with ‘who’ can become pro-
198 duced as a recognizable subject, a subject who is living, whose life is worth
199 sheltering and whose life, when lost would be worthy of mourning” (Butler, 2009,
Q13 p. xii). Thus individuals, when they contest precarity and become 201 vocal, not only assert
Q14 their agency but also by interrupting the “normative 202 scheme” attain recognizability. In
this way, they momentarily come to 203 test their “precarious lives.” Precarious lives are
those that do not qualify as 204 recognizable, readable, or grievable (Butler, 2009, p. xiii).
Thus, on stage an 205 asylum seeker dispossessed of formal citizenship and the basic right
to 206 bility, is able to reposition her- or himself to the German audience through 207
her or his performative agency. As Butler argues:

208 The subject who exercises freedom in this way is, in turn, defined by 209 this very exercise,
which is to say that the subject becomes a form of 210 performative agency ... such a subject
breaks out of the established 211 framework within which public politics proceeds, facilitating
a certain 212 crisis in the framework, posing anew the question of what can and cannot 213
intelligibly take place within that framework (2010).

214 In this vein, the refugees in collaboration with the theater company 215 break themselves
away from the ways in which they are positioned within 216 dominant German society and
articulate and convey themselves in novel 217 ways. The refugee is positioned as an object
and victim of her or his 218 circumstances in the minds of the German public, but on stage
she or he is 219 able to reposition her- or himself to the audience through speech and bod-
220 ily gestures. Thus, the asylum seekers who are often depicted as deceitful, 221 since the
foreigners’ office rejects a sizeable percentage of asylum cases, 222 gain credibility and
disrupt certain frames through their speech acts within 223 the spatiality of the theater.

224

METHODOLOGY

225 This article is based on an ethnographic study of the theater-play *Die Asyl-*
226 *Monologe*. The rationale for employing an ethnographic methodology was 227 to
provide an analysis of the self-presentation and political performances 228 of refugees
within the sphere of theater. Interviews provided further 229 sights into the broader
context and helped me gain an understanding of the 230 German and European
asylum policies. As O’Reilly (2012) contends, ethno-231 graphic methodology allows
for the telling of rich, sensitive, and credible 232 stories when it involves direct and
sustained contact with human beings over 233 a prolonged period of time. Similarly,
Creswell (2003) suggests that a qualita-234 tive approach helps facilitate understanding
meanings from the participants’ 235 point of view. More specifically, O’Neill (2008)
points out that ethnographic 236 methodology helps transform dominant

understandings and representations of subaltern groups such as asylum seekers and refugees: “Ultimately

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

241 Thus, I decided to employ an ethnographic approach, which involved
242 touring with the theater company and seeing multiple viewings of *Die Asyl-*

243 *Dialoge*. More specifically, I saw seven viewings, of which three of the
244 performances were based in Berlin at the Heimathafen-Neukolln theater.”

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245 The home theater is located in Neukolln, a neighborhood with a significant
246 first- and second-generation Turkish population, as well immigrants from

247 Palestine and other Arabic speaking nations. In addition to viewing the per-
248 formances in Berlin, I saw another performance in Neubrandenburg at a

249 university in the department of social work. Additionally, I toured with the
250 theater team to towns, such as Magdeburg and Potsdam where I saw two

251 more performances. Finally, I saw one performance at the refugees’ protest

252 camp at the Orange Square in Berlin, which was held as part of their daily
253 cultural series “Roses for Refugees.” I interviewed the director as well as

Q16

254 the actors focusing collaborative practices within the theater—the subject
255 matter of this essay—and held informal conversations with refugees who

256 participated during the discussion sessions at the theater following the per-

257 formance. The refugees who participated in the theater included individuals
258 from Afghanistan, South Sudan, Mali, and Burkina Faso. I recorded the audio

259 portion of the performances. The refugees who spoke following the theater

260 performance varied with respect to their attainment of legal status. Many of

261 the refugees were staying in their respective assigned area of jurisdiction

262 since the theater travelled to cities and towns where these “Heims” were lo-

263 cated. Some of the refugees were on Duldung status (toleration by the state),
264 while others were waiting for their asylum-cases to be processed, and yet
265 others were simply staying in Berlin and formed part of an ongoing refugee
266 movement. In order to gain insights into the performative acts of refugees
267 in *Die Asyl-Monologe*, I chose to watch performances in Berlin as well as
268 in towns and cities. Thus I acquired an understanding of how refugees liv-
269 ing in the nearby Heims participated in the theater. Therefore, I travelled
270 with the theater company to three towns located outside the capital city.
271 The refugees spoke in English and French and translation was provided in
272 German for the German-speaking audience. I discovered very quickly that
273 my Pakistani background facilitated a South-South dialogue with English-
274 speaking refugees particularly from nation-states such as Sudan and Nigeria.

Q17

275 THE STAGE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

276 A director, based in Berlin, Michael Ruf started a theater company called
277 Stage for Human Rights in the year 2012. This performance is known as
278 verbatim-theater or “ethno-drama” (Saldana, 2005), where as in this particular
279 case, professional actors narrate the actual experiences and perspectives of
280 refugees in German on stage based on actual testimonies told to the in281 terviewers
who record their voices. However, the interviews were trans282 lated into German for
the German-speaking audience. For the non-German283 speaking audience, subtitles
were provided in English, French, and Turkish. 284 There is minimum use of
aesthetics within the entire performance. The light285 ing is mellow; the three German
actors are dressed simply in jeans and 286 shirts, stand and relate the testimonies of
the refugees in an even voice with287 out much dramatization. The actors take turns
in relating different aspect of 288 the refugees’ narrative—the abstract, problematic
events, and resolution. The
289 music performed tended to vary, but it included pieces such as Billy Holiday’s 290
“Strange Fruit,” a protest song sung in Arabic during the Arab Spring protests, 291 and
some pieces of cello music. Thus, the music, interspersed within the nar292 rations, served
as an interlude during which the audience could reflect on 293 the testimonies and served
to further create the ambience for activist theater. 294 In this regard, *Die Asyl-Dialoge* could
be regarded in Saldana’s terms as an 295 “ethno-drama,” which by collaborating with

Q18

refugees and refugee activists 296 helps expose oppression and challenge the existing social order (Saldana, 297 2005, 2011).

298 Following the actual performance by three professional actors, there 299 were various forms of discussion sessions with the audience, where the au300 dience received the opportunity to interact with refugee supporters, human301 rights lawyers, the refugees themselves, and human-rights groups such as 302 Amnesty International. Over the past 3 years, *Die Asyl-Monologe* had been

303 performed in several cities in Germany in various spaces such as schools, uni304 versities, churches, and cafes. Although there has been much representation 305 and self-representation of refugees in the arts in forms such as music, liter306 ature, and painting, with the goal of shifting discourses and representations

307 about immigrants, this performance was unique because of its collaboration

Q19 308 with refugee activists and its three and a half long duration, that it can be 309 understood to be very much contained within the broader politics of refugee 310 activism within Germany. Thus, the refugee activists who form part of this 311 political documentary theater piece can be understood as political agents, 312 and the actors, the directors, and an intern can be understood to work in 313 collaboration with the refugee activists in transposing refugee politics and in 314 shifting the everyday understandings of refugees. For example, in 2014, in 315 Manchester, UK, a group of refugee women published a collection of testi-

316 monies about their experiences and produced a theater piece entitled *How*

Q20 317 *I Became an Asylum Seeker*. But these art forms could not be understood to 318 be embedded within a particular refugee movement or activism in the same 319 manner since the duration of these projects was limited and not on going as 320 in the case of *Die Asyl-Monologe*.

321 The political and performative agency of the refugee activist needs to 322 be underscored, since they accept invitations to be on stage and to interact 323 with the audience. For example, when the theater performed an excerpt of 324 their piece at Oranienplatz as part of the “Roses for Refugees” daily cultural 325 events, one of the key activists of this protest campsite made a speech out326 lining the conditions of the asylum policy and their campaigns to challenge 327 these conditions on the local level. The refugees did not perceive them328 selves as working in isolation but rather in conjunction with differing cultural 329 groups. These collaborations on the part of the refugee activism and theater 330 company could be understood through theoretical paradigms within classic 331 social movement theory such as insurgent consciousness and resource mo-

332 bilization (e.g., Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zaid, 1977; Tilly, 1978). However, **Q21**

333 seldom have these concepts been included in discussions within the context 334 of refugee activism. In this sense, the collaboration between refugee activists 335 and the theater can arguably be understood to adopt a radical turn. One 336 refugee activist explained to me that rather than negotiating with politicians 337 and exclusively relying on demonstrations to get their demands heard, they 338 considered it part of their strategy to form alliances with cultural workers 339 and neighborhood groups: “If you start to dialogue with

politicians, you just 340 end up compromising and then they try to manipulate you. So our strategy 341 is to work with cultural groups and neighbours and we hope that they will 342 support our demands.” The following paragraphs provide further details of 343 some of the actual performance and discussion sessions and the ways in 344 which refugee activists enacted themselves during these sessions.

345 PERFORMATIVITY THROUGH THE ACTORS' VOICES

346 The first part of *Die Asyl-Monologe* is performed by three professional actors 347 who narrate the actual experiences of three refugees, Safiye from Turkey, Ali 348 from Togo, and Felleke from Ethiopia, who currently live in Germany. These 349 refugees were initially interviewed and the script of the theater is based 350 on their actual interviews. As one of the actors, Asad carefully explained

351 to me,

352 to use the word (for *Die Asyl-Monologe*) the word “creation” is wrong. 353 Because I checked it’s a copy, it’s a text, it’s an experience of somebody 354 who is still alive and even younger than me but just have another life 355 experience. From the moment he gave this interview to Michael and we 356 have it black and white, we read it as a text. But we can’t add something. 357 You can’t give your own personality inside. It’s impossible to say what 358 we want to say because we are just the voice of somebody else. I think 359 for this project we need to be beware of making our own creations. 360 Because it’s not our history we should be careful to consider their voice 361 and our own voice. We can heighten or lighten the voices but can’t say 362 we are the refugees. We can’t say we are the asylum seekers.

363 Excerpts of testimonies of Safiye, Ali, and Felleke, who sought asylum 364 in Germany because of persecution in the public sphere in their respective 365 states, can be characterized as political resistance to German asylum policies 366 as well as expressions of collaborations with aspects of German society who 367 are sympathetic to the refugee movement. For example, Safiye expressed

368 her resistance when upon losing her asylum case the first time, preservers to

Q22 369 appeal, wins, and raises a family in Berlin. Felleke actively resisted depor370 tation to Ethiopia with the support of an active campaign. The testimonies 371 did not simply reveal their challenging experiences limited to their countries 372 of origin, they demonstrated how the three individuals contested the bu373 reaucracies of the asylum-seeking process within Germany, the limitations 374 on their movements, and the substandard housing arrangements for asylum 375 seekers. Butler (1997) forcefully critiques the notion of subjecthood and un376 derstands performativity as a renewable action without clear origin or end.

377 She suggests that speech is finally constrained neither by its specific speaker 378 nor its originating context. She argues, “Not only defined by social context, 379 such speech is also marked by its capacity to break with context” (1997,

380 p. 40).

381 Therefore, the refugees' voices performed through the bodies of actors 382 can be understood as a form of resistance against tropes of victimhood and 383 suffering. The testimonies break away from their original contexts such as 384 prisons, detention centers, Lagers, and the foreigners' office. Furthermore, 385 these testimonies serve to subvert the very basis of the refugees' identity 386 itself and aim to mobilize the audience into action.

387 Testimony has been understood as problematic because it transposes 388 humans into victims, calling attention to suffering rather than interrogating

389 questions of power (e.g., Tyler 2006; Fassin 2005; Malkki, 1996; Millner,

Q23 390 2011). But these testimonies, which focus on inverting discourses regard391 ing asylum seekers, can be understood in Butler's terms "in which agency 392 is derived from injury, and injury countered through that very derivation" 393 (1997, p. 41). The following excerpts of the three individuals who provide 394 accounts of their experiences of their asylum-seeking process through the 395 actors demonstrate this point of view. In the following instances, the asylum 396 seekers speak of their experiences. Safiye and Felleke provide accounts of 397 their experiences with their interviewers from the Auslaenderbehoerde. Ali 398 provides his experience with a doctor in Germany.

399 Safiye: I told my story and she was on the phone. She phoned the 400 whole time. If she'd been really interested, she would have tried to un401 derstand from my facial expressions and my mimic, whether I really 402 experienced it or not. I think the interview took 4 to 5 hours. The inter-

403 viewer was very unfriendly. She conveyed to me "What are you doing 404 here? You caused extra work for me. You won't get what you want

405 anyways."

406 Felleke: Nearly all interviewers follow the same strategy. They intention407 ally try to mess up the minds of refugees in order to make them fail. For 408 all of my life I had dealt with decent human beings. And then for the first 409 time I was standing in front of this man spitting and beating the table 410 with his fists.

411 Ali: I had an examination of the lungs at the hospital. Electrodes were 412 fixed everywhere. A doctor asked me whether I was smoking or drinking 413 alcohol, but I declined. Then he asked what kind of problem I had. 414 Nothing but the asylum-problem, I answered.

415 These voices of the refugee activists, within the setting of the documentary 416 theater, clearly show they struggle to invert Butler's notion of "injurious" 417 language that interviewers at the Auslaenderbehoerde directs toward asylum 418 seekers. By recounting and performing the very interview questions and 419 a doctor's evaluation, the refugees through their performative acts become 420 activists before an audience at a well-known theater space in Berlin. Thus, 421 the experience of the refugees with the doctor and the

interviewers break 422 away from their actual frames and context, embodying new meanings within 423 new spatialities.

424 Thus, these narratives demonstrate that refugee activism can be com425 prehended through performative acts, since these acts actually disrupt the 426 public sphere such that the logic of the binaries of exclusion/inclusion, which 427 the nation-states impose upon immigrants and refugees, are contested (e.g., 428 Nyers, 2006; Tyler, 2013).

429 The merging of the voices of citizens and noncitizens, the inclusion of 430 refugees onstage during follow-up discussions, the particular narratives of 431 refugee activists, the ideological position of the theater team, the different 432 formats of the postperformance discussions, and the spaces (outside the 433 bounds of formal cultural venues) in which many of the performances take 434 place are some of the elements of this documentary theater that lends itself 435 to these “repeated disturbances between formal theater and political action” 436 (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). In this regard, performance art not only becomes 437 part of a larger political movement for refugees’ rights, but that the refugees’ 438 voices together with the actors’ voices become intrinsically a collaborative 439 political movement, where the voices of refugee activists manifest political 440 expressions and the voices of the theater team express solidarity with the 441 wider refugee movement.

442 What is also important here is to consider that refugees engage in a 443 dialogue between the actors and the audience through which the political 444 agency of refugees is reinforced such that the individual testimonies adopt 445 a collective tone and they ultimately have an impact on the audience even

446 to a sympathetic audience. As an intern working at the theater told me in Q24

447 one town in Bremen, the audience spontaneously formed a refugee action 448 group following the theater performance. But these political acts of refugees 449 do not occur in a vacuum, but in conjunction with the actors and the theater 450 team who let such voices manifest themselves. In this manner, the frame 451 within which these divergent voices occur can be understood to be a form 452 of a solidarity between the spectators, actors, the director, and the refugee 453 activists.

454 REFUGEE ACTIVISTS AND THE DISCUSSION SESSIONS

455 Following the 90-minute performance of testimonies of asylum seekers that 456 were related by three actors, the stage came to be transformed into what 457 might be easily construed as a “political event,” comprising refugee-led ac458 tivists and members of the German society sympathetic to the cause of rights 459 from refugees. It becomes useful to consider Butler’s notion of “repetition” 460 and “iteration” in this context. The actors convey the actual testimonies of 461 the refugees, but these testimonies are reinforced, repeated, and reiterated 462 on stage by the bodies of actual refugees. When

refugee activists and the theater 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.

Q25 466 Jeffers (2012) suggests that theatrical performances about refugees' stories becomes spaces of hospitality for refugees and that the "offer of hospital stage" on which refugee stories can be reenacted is just that, a stage, not substantial, not "real." However, the refugee activists' actual presence and voices on stage reframe 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:

477 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.

494 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 at which "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 question-and-answer dialogue 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 contestation that 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 that differs from the expressions of refugees in hunger strikes, demonstrations, and rallies, (e.g., Puggoni, 2014; Tyler, 2013). 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, she refused to be paralyzed by it and countered the "offensive call," producing several responses and actions (Butler, 1997). In this regard, her articulations on stage further serve to reiterate and reinforce her prior actions. 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 on stage, their enactments of their political identities in collaboration with cultural workers not only help in understanding their social world but also enable a transformation in their social image and positioning.

Similarly, following another theater 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 ongoing preparation for a refugee protest march from Strasbourg to Brussels; the date of the start of the march, May 20, 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 Strasbourg to Brussels. I have been 553 in all these countries organizing demonstration, Greece, Belgium, Italy, 554 France, Denmark. I am in the logistic group here. And I said, 'Okay, I 555 will now organize a march here.' The idea of the march is to start around 556 20th of May around the European elections. And to continue marching 557 for 29 days. Some of the interior ministers of the EU will meet in Brussels 558 around that time. We will speak of freedom of movement for refugees, 559 recognition of refugee rights, and to stop criminalising refugees and to 560 speak of laws of in countries that kills us which forces refugees to go to 561 other countries. The idea of the march came by connecting with people 562 in different countries in Europe. We meet at Kotti Cafe every Sunday' 563 afternoon and you can get more information. We are expecting about 564 300 to 500 people to participate in the march.

565 Castles (2003) contends that at one stage the task of sociology of
566 forced migration was concerned with the study of people forced to flee 567 from one society to become part of another. He argues that globalization 568 and transnationalism make this conceptualization anachronistic, since the 569 boundaries of national societies are becoming increasingly blurred. In this 570 regard, Asem's onstage performative campaigning of a forthcoming Euro571 pean political march demonstrates his connections to differing European 572 nation-states as well as his continued concerns with the situation in the 573 global South. Thus, the refugee's identity in the host nation needs to be 574 understood as being consequential to local and global asylum politics. Fur575 thermore, it becomes important to acknowledge that refugees do not accept 576 their position in their host nation in passive ways but rather they engage 577 in "counter-speech." As Butler notes: The interval between instances of ut578 terances not only makes the repetition and resignification of the utterance 579 possible, but shows how words might through time, become disjoined from 580 their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes (1997,

581 p. 15).

582 Additionally, Asem's onstage appearance with Ruf, with Asad an actor, 583 and a human rights lawyer constituted a collaborative frame for the Ger584 man audience who through raising questions became part of this frame. 585 Furthermore, this collaborative framework reinforced not only the notion 586 of authentic theater but additionally helped create an arena for "doing" 587 political activism. In this sense, the activist identity of the refugee is re588 vealed in the public sphere in a manner that the collective nature of 589 demonstrations would not necessarily allow. This does not necessarily un590 dermine the collective power of refugee activism, but rather for refugees

591 whose identities are subject to constant denouncements, these performa592 tive aspects of activism help them acquire an even more visible agentive 593 personhood. The German state immobilizes refugees physically by hous594 ing them in Lagers, in remote towns, and become instrumental in im595 printing demonized images on the minds of German

consciousness, but 596 refugee activists discover ways to continually resist these fixed ways of

597 being.

598 Whereas Asem's collaboration with the theater allowed him to campaign 599 for a forthcoming march, in other instances refugees' engagements with the 600 theater allowed them to tell their narratives of their past experiences. Jeffers 601 (2014) has noted that the telling of testimonies for refugees and asylum seek602 ers in the context of theater becomes consequential since in many instances 603 they desire an audience who is willing to listen to them because in so many 604 situations their voices become silenced. When I met Maqbool, a refugee 605 from Afghanistan from an organization called Welcome2Europe, outside the 606 theater, he briefly introduced himself to me and mentioned to me that he 607 had spent some time in Pakistan where he had learned to speak Urdu and 608 play cricket. He also told me that his mother was still in Peshawar, Pakistan. 609 On stage, he related a rather lengthy and detailed story about his arduous 610 journey from Pakistan to Germany:

611 Maqbool: Yeah, it all began with the NATO occupation in Afghanistan. 612 My family was not feeling safe so we decided to leave and somehow 613 we were pushed by foreign troops to leave the country. So we went to 614 Pakistan. As everyone knows that Pakistan is not safe. Kind of like the 615 same situation like Afghanistan. My mother also thought that I should 616 leave the country and obviously she thought that I wasn't safe in the 617 country. I also said, "okay" then I will leave the country. I came from 618 Pakistan to Iran and then to Turkey. Quite difficult to cross the bor619 ders, and not to have the legal papers. Sometimes 48 hours without 620 food and water. Being afraid of being shot in the borders or being sent 621 back to the back to the borders. Anyway, after months I made it to 622 Istanbul ...

623 In this manner, Maqbool continued to tell his story of his difficult journey 624 to Germany. Maqbool's articulation of past experience can be understood 625 as him forming and maintaining some link with his country of origin. Fur626 thermore, Maqbool's narrative clearly demonstrates how his migration was a 627 direct consequence of stratified North-South relations such as the NATO war. 628 Thus the very notion of the refugee movement to an "autonomous national 629 society" becomes destabilized: the migration process needs to be understood 630 in terms of North-South relations (Castles, 2003). In his interaction with the 631 audience, Maqbool articulated that refugees even without formal citizenship 632 can contest state borders at differing levels. However, it is this very exercise 633 that enabled Maqbool to break away from the discourse of a "victim," to a 634 survivor, to a "supporter" since he speaks of helping other refugees. Butler 635 (2009) notes referring to Hannah Arendt that when stateless people engage 636 in certain actions in the public, "the right to have rights" becomes a perfor637 mative exercise and that freedom comes into being through its exercise. In 638 this regard, when refugees perform their testimonies to

the audience, their 639 rights to have the rights to address a German audience in the public sphere 640 becomes an emancipatory act.

641 The collaborations, connections, and intimacies between the theater 642 team, members of the audience, researchers, and the refugee activists could 643 be understood to adopt varying dimensions. On one level, the collaborative 644 framework could be understood in formal terms, where a refugee enters 645 into an agreement with the theater to participate in the public sphere; but 646 on another level, the alliances occur on a platform whereupon refugee and 647 members of the audience as well as in some instances members of the the648 ater team may interact on more informal terms. However, it is important 649 to recognize that the theater team did not simply “host” the refugees since 650 they themselves appeared to fully comprehend the momentum of refugee 651 politics. Because the team aligned very closely to the local refugee activism, 652 the collaborations that occur between the theater’s core team could not be 653 simply understood in terms of Derrida’s (2000) notion of “hospitality”—laden 654 with conditions. Derrida asks, “Must we ask the foreigners to understand us, 655 to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible ex656 clusions, and so as to be able to welcome him into our country?” (p. 15). 657 In fact, these onstage and off-stage collaborations subverted the notion of 658 conditional “hospitality,” which the German state demonstrates toward asy659 lum seekers—since on stage the refugees expressed their viewpoints freely 660 and in their language of choice with the audience, with cultural workers, 661 and NGO workers in the language of their choice, with some degree of 662 moderation.

663 REFUGEE ACTIVISTS AND THE LOCAL CONTEXT

664 While Maqbool and Asem expressed their narratives in Berlin within the 665 space of a theater, which accommodated about a hundred people, there 666 were other refugee activists who spoke about specific local issues when *Die* 667 *Asyl-Monologe* performed outside Berlin. For example, during the discussion

668 session in Neubrandenburg, several of the refugees on stage and off stage 669 spoke of racial profiling with much emotion. In one instance, a refugee who 670 was a member of the audience exchanged seats with a refugee who was on 671 stage. As one of the refugees explained to the audience:

672 I have been in Europe for 20 years. Whenever I take the bus I always 673 have to show my license. Just because of my colour I have to show my 674 license. When I go to the train station I have to show my license. I feel 675 that I get controlled in every corner. I feel angry about this situation. Last

676 Saturday I said to the police, “I’m not going to show you my license.”

677 These expressions did not go unheard and one of the German activists on
678 stage told the refugee rather helpfully about an organization called “logging,”
679 where incidents about victims of racial violence could be logged and doc680
umented. She also further explained that they document about experiences 681

of people who have suffered from racial violence from the far-right party in Germany, NPD.

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 about whether the police controlled him because he didn't have any legal right to be in Germany or if 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, and individuals of colour, and about restricted spaces within Lagers for refugees continued on stage. 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 theater 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 on stage 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 of 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 theater since they defied the traditional format where the moderator/director had the ultimate power to govern the onstage conversations.

735 tions.

736 It is important to understand the specificities of the different problems
737 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:

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

750 Thus, in this way the refugee repositions himself on the stage for human
751 rights. Within the dominant German society, the refugee is understood as an
752 alien but on stage the refugee exhibits willingness to integrate by display-
753 ing his or her willingness to work and learn the language. Scholars have
754 noted that in several protests and demonstrations, asylum seekers and their
755 supporters have called attention to similar concerns (Bhimji, 2014; Cisneros,
756 2011; Galvez, 2009; Gonzales, 2011; Menjivar, 2006; Milner, 2011; Rigby &
757 Schiembach, 2013; Rygeil, 2011; Tyler, 2013). However, on stage, in alliance
758 with a German director and actors, while speaking to German and interna-
759 tional students within the context of a university, these words become even
760 more forceful. The refugee is in an elevated position and standing while the

761 audience is seated below. Furthermore, the refugee refrains from being a
762 spectacle for the audience, since he is actually present during the theater,
763 voicing his or her concerns and dilemmas.

764 Hence the collaboration between the refugee activists and the theater
765 needs to be understood in dynamic ways since the above accounts demon-
766 strate that refugee activists differed considerably in the ways in which they
767 expressed themselves on stage. However, what is significant here is that
768 through their very presence and their expressions, they managed to, within
769 this liminal space, momentarily subvert and resist the very laws that the Ger-
770 man state imposes upon them. In such a situation, the German audience
771 understands the refugees to be disconnected, victimized, and disengaged.
772 But within the space of the theater, through exercising their rights to speak
773 within a public sphere, the refugees' imposed identities fade since the Ger-
774 man audience sees the refugee as a social actor who is well connected and
775 active. In this sense, Butler's (2010) argument of the subject becoming a form
776 of performative agency when such a subject breaks out of the established
777 framework becomes useful. Moreover, these links and connections occur on
778 a face-to-face level rather than in virtual space or a collective sphere such
779 as in demonstrations and protests where it is still possible to maintain some
780 distance. In this way, the audience is not allowed to simply demonstrate "dis-
781 tant compassion" (Boltanski,1999), but rather they are encouraged to engage
782 and self-reflect about local injustices and activism within their own vicinities.

783 These performative aspects of the refugee activists become additionally
784 significant because of its temporal dimensions, which has not been addressed
785 in the scholarship of immigrant activism. During the actual performance, the
786 actors relate the stories of three refugees who were interviewed 3 years

787 ago, and their narratives invoked past memories of three refugees. However, 788 the refugees speak of current and topical issues. In this regard, the narra789 tives of the refugees help achieve political continuities between historical 790 accounts and current accounts. Kleist (2013) implies that memories can be 791 politically contested, “Both for their interpretation of the past and their con792 sequences in the present” (p. 669). For the German audience, the theater is 793 transposed from a space where they hear a narration of performed political 794 memories of refugees to a site of contestation, where they witness certain 795 actions in the present and where the refugees themselves are proactive in 796 staging their own circumstance and future course of action toward change. 797 In this way the refugees further help establish authenticity for the German 798 audience.

799

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

800 The sociology of forced migration and asylum have been concerned about 801 the causes, the formation of identities, and more recently the political activism 802 of asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants. Castels argues that since the 803 1990s there has been “a politicisation of migration and asylum, marked by

804 heated public debates and competition between the parties to be toughest

Q28 805 on ‘illegals.’” This article demonstrated refugees’ aim to socially transform 806 and contest such debates and discourses. The refugees arguably perform 807 their political agency on stage as they speak of their various struggles and 808 campaigns to counter the injustices they are faced with.

809 While scholars recognize refugees and immigrants as political subjects 810 and political actors in the context of rallies, protest camps, and demonstra811 tions, the idea of refugee activists as creating disturbances and articulating 812 their own positions is less discussed in the context of performance art. In 813 considering refugees as political and cultural activists, actors, and cultural 814 workers and as supportive interventionists within the realm of theater allows 815 considerations of differing forms of political expression and solidarity and 816 of advocacy work in the public sphere. The refugee activists, the actors, by 817 virtue of performing in differing spaces, of using differing formats, of invit818 ing and being invited by refugee activists, and of contesting state power in 819 the testimonies, invoke a paradox in which the performances translate into 820 political action and art simultaneously. 821 Performance art not only becomes part of a larger political movement 822 for refugees’ rights, but the refugees’ voices together with the actors’ voices 823 become intrinsically a collaborative political movement, wherein the voices 824 of refugee activists manifest political expressions and the voices of the theater 825 team express solidarity within the wider refugee movement. This form of 826 collaboration became even more visible when actual refugees came and 827 spoke to the audience in the second part of the event.

828 Refugees, through their willingness to collaborate with this theater 829 team—who performed and conveyed their narratives of suffering, hope, 830 resilience, and everyday living—ultimately come to reposition themselves 831 through their speech acts and

performative acts. O'Neill (2008) notes that through this collaborative process with cultural workers, refugees and asylum seekers find the ways and means of representing their stories. Thus, in this manner, the refugees destabilized the categories of "refugees" and "asylum seekers" while they presented themselves as activists, as humans, 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 theater 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 regarding how alternative spaces such as the theater may lend itself to similar ways of being for stateless people. Furthermore, it is in the context of theater that the performative aspects gain prominence in ways that protests and activism in camps may not allow. Within the space of theater, the refugee can elect to "talk back," "embody," "parody," or simply "retell" their experiences. It is 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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