

Introduction

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In the summer of 2015, while on a short visit to Germany, I passed by a central train station and saw shocked-looking groups of people with backpacks deboarding buses. I had a familiar irritation in my chest, and my feet felt heavy. I turned and saw more people in fear while many others approached to lend a hand. I asked around and learned that these were asylum seekers who had just arrived in Germany. The day passed with both ease and unease, ending in a “refugee-welcoming” performance space where a Syrian group sang and played music. The singing was in Arabic. While I could understand the lyrics, those standing near me did not seem to understand, but they danced with the rhythm and cheered.

A year later, May Skaf, a Syrian actress, stood on a podium at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin to perform *Letter from Tigers to Humanity*. This performance was a collaboration between the Centre for Political Beauty (CPB), May Skaf, and the Gorki. In this provocative political theatre piece, bearing some semblance to Christoph Schlingensiefel’s *Ausländer Raus* container project *Bitte liebt Österreich* in Vienna in 2000, the CPB campaigned to have refugees be devoured by tigers in Berlin if the government were to forbid 100 Syrian asylum seekers from entry into Germany. The collective had planned to fly them illegally from Izmir into Berlin on a specially chartered plane on June 28, 2016. After Air Berlin cancelled the flight on Tuesday morning, the tiger feeding was scheduled for that same evening at the Maxim Gorki Theatre. The producer sought volunteers through the campaign’s website, claiming to have found at least one refugee ready to be devoured. The refugee who allegedly prepared to sacrifice herself was Actress May Skaf. However, instead of jumping into the cage, she delivered a speech in the form of a monodrama about her story of seeking refuge in Europe.

I met Skaf two years later during my research. She described to me the process of collaboration with the writer and producer of the performance:

“It was my only chance to say what I wanted, to tell the whole world. I wanted to emphasise the word ‘Europe’ and its supremacy and politics toward refugees at borders. I did not want to beg. I wanted everything to be real. The tigers’ part of the performance was the part I liked least because it was not real, and I wanted

everything to be real. [...] When I saw the tiger in the cage, I realised I had the same white hair as it had on its body. They [the artistic team] liked the idea and planned the accessories to look tiger-like. The performance was about me being a refugee actress, talking about my journey. I call it a résumé; it tells my story. The performance delivered a political message and spoke of my refugee experience. I was not acting, and I meant every word I said from my heart. The audience could feel that I was not acting, either. I did not hear any clapping right at the end of the show. The audience took a while to realise it was a show where they would clap.” (Skaf 2017)

Since this performance and the day at the station, I have seen theatres chasing migrants’ realities. There has been a growing interest in performing arts productions involving refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers. Forms of verbatim and documentary theatre have become a political tool for solidarity (Flynn & Tinius, 2015). I kept Skaf’s performance in mind whenever I attended a performance by an artist arriving in Germany. I tried to understand what was unique about these performing artists’ cultural experiences in Europe. Who has the right to tell a personal story? Can such stories stand against the robust systems of hegemonic, statist narratives and representations?

As a Palestinian, I had several questions come to my mind. For instance, when would a Palestinian artist get to stand freely in a world-renowned theatre and say whatever she decides to say about (human) rights and Western standards? Or an Iraqi? Or a Native American? Am I discriminating on the basis of similar labels of nationality, too, or are meta- and micro-systems of powers and borders imposing them on me by being exclusive? I also wanted to know how these migrant artists’ experiences differed from those of nomad artists or migrants, who were not artists, as Javeh Asefdjah questions in her essay contribution in the group profile section of this book. For years after 2017, policies were created in Europe to enhance artists’ cultural participation, such as funding ensembles for migrant artists in Germany, governmental funding for artists in Austria, France and Belgium, and programmes in Sweden that kept the wheel of solidarity art rolling – and a Global Refugee Art market growing. In July 2018, Skaf passed away, but many other artists continued to find ways to perform. By 2019, I noticed that the intensity of artists’ engagement was fading, and some of the newly established “refugee” or “migrant” ensembles had already been dissolved. During the global COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 onwards, the news barely mentioned any significant theatre programs related to exile, open borders, or collectives. Theatre buildings of all ideologies became vacant, and artists either stayed aside and waited or shifted their corporeal reality to virtual spaces. The news moved on, and digital theatre became the new thing, to put it cynically (Wihstutz, Vecchiato & Kreuser, 2022). The latest wave of refugees from Ukraine re-activated interest and debates on art by migrants. The rise of cancellations of the-

atre and artistic events with political backgrounds in Germany, such as at Gorki in 2023 and other European cities, raised further concerns about freedom of speech, democracy, and the question of whose voices are heard and whose are not. The fall of the Syrian regime at the end of 2024 reactivated again the status of Syrian refugees in Germany and brought new challenges and queries related to return migration and artist safety and cultural freedoms. This book provides a testimony of a five-year (2017–2021) collective journey among hundreds of art workers at more than six theatre institutions to call for and try to understand what diversity in theatre can mean. This took place under the umbrella of what we called the PostHeimat Network. It ploughs the “Refugees Welcome” soil to advocate for people’s transnational cultural experiences and means of their representation, especially those considered “creative” as artists and workers in theatre.

Reflecting and writing about this journey is not an easy task; it is full of queries that contemplate the difficulty that Edward Said (2013) saw in the process: “to represent someone or even something has now become an endeavour as complex and as problematic as an asymptote, with consequences for certainty and decidability as fraught with difficulties as can be imagined” (2013: 285). The journey of this book is also a contemplation of preceding efforts by German-speaking theatre institutions against populist, white-centric, Eurocentric perceptions that dominate the perspectives around theatre and against patterns of urban economic, spatial, and temporal transformations resulting from capitalist and social systems. This testimony brings hope for a future of theatre that minds its past.

Theatre and Decolonisation

As a testimony, the book connects personal stories about migration, theatre practice, and ethnography to reveal entanglements with processes of decolonisation where conceptions about ‘home’ are negotiated. Meaning-making of theatre practice resembles stories about ‘home’ that are narrated, performed, and observed, bringing a plethora of explanations that are examined through anthropology, theatricality, and the performative, ontological and decolonial turns (Gluhovic et al., 2021; Bejarano et al., 2019; Balme, 1999). Focus on decolonising the concept of home through theatre provides arguments on practice and cases where indigenous communities, migrant and marginalised groups, and others are still under the mighty powers of colonialism, socialism, and capitalism (Tuck & Yang, 2021). For example, forms of decolonial anthropology, such as ‘action anthropology’ and ‘practising anthropology’, and methods which include participatory and collaborative approaches provide means that the discipline seeks to transcend Eurocentrism towards applied engagement and activism (Chávez & Skelchy, 2019; Bejarano et al., 2019; Alexander et al., 2021).

In theatre, decolonising research and practice evolved in the past decades in forms such as ‘public’ or ‘native’ engagements. They converse with and reverse the coloniality in Western paradigms of explanations by understanding confrontations with the intolerable academisation of the suffering of communities that are made an object of study (Sharifi & Skwirblies, 2022). While colonialism is a system of political, economic, and cultural domination in which one nation or people establish sovereignty over another, coloniality is what endures long after the formal systems of colonial rule have disappeared (Stoler, 2016). Discussions on the case of migration and theatre connected to it appeal to both notions, especially that migrants, once under the sovereignty of the host countries’ formal political, economic and cultural systems, live under new colonial rules in addition to remnants of coloniality they bring with them from ‘home’, supposing that their home countries were not among those who still suffer under unended colonial rule. In other words, hosting implies, in Derrida’s phrasing, always hostility and exclusion, or “hostipitality”; these are two sides of the same coin, and they are activated in the act of crossing the threshold of a nation, a host, a home, *Heimat* (Derrida, 2000; Agudio, Buetti & Ndikung, 2020).

Tuck and Yung’s essay “Decolonization is not a metaphor” (2021) argues that current uses of decolonisation liquidise the violence of colonial and coloniality processes into a resolvable issue in the status quo by promoting reconciliation with it. In cases such as colonisation in Palestine and beyond, Khalidi (2021: 240) discusses three layers of confrontation that have historically marked indigenous people during their struggle for decolonisation: the elimination of the entire subjugation of indigenous people, the defeat and expulsion of the coloniser, and the reconciliation with the colonised. Decolonising practice and research in a migration context are also multi-layered by communities turning from objects into active participants in the meaning-making of cultural practices. They turn the practice into a resistive engagement tool and confrontational activism of both colonialism and coloniality. Here, theatre becomes the playground, which several scholars explained as a movement against discourses and absolutes, such as Turner’s (1979) introduction of the concept of making, not faking, and Bhabha’s (2012) political view of performance as breaking and remaking. Theatre-making as active participation is a type of self-ethnography that promotes the plurality of narratives and invites possibilities to practice open, flexible, adaptable, situation-sensitive, and nuanced meaning creation, all contained within a diversity perception (Bala, 2017). In this sense, theatre becomes what Conquergood explains, “the commonplace, the nexus between the playful and the political” (1992: 80).

That said, the discussion about diversity in contemporary German theatre scenes deals with decolonisation in ways that shift the confrontation with such systems away from being a mere metaphor. This book is one such serious attempt at exploring discourses, methodologies, and experiences grounded in the German-speaking theatre scene where independent theatre institutions and practitioners

are in constant movement of resistance towards means for change in mentalities, procedures, and policies. In one of its sections, our interview with theatre scholar Azadeh Sharifi (2021) on contemporary theatre practices in Germany provides that decolonisation efforts made by German academia and art institutions are deeply rooted in colonial epistemology, where it is not very worthy to operate in the same old terms or insert new meanings to them. Beyond the book, Sruti Bala (2017) calls for decolonising theatre studies and practices by rethinking these as a “site of the collective pursuit of nurturing the free imagination” (335, see also Sharifi & Skwirblies, 2022). Through inviting an anecdotal story form as a reflexive approach to promote a view on how collectives can pursue free imagination, Bala aimed “to make as visible as possible the grounds from which perceived realities are discursively constructed” (2017: 336). This book provides inquiries about theatre and migration by putting into the readers’ hands anecdotal stories, narratives, observations, debates, and scholarly examinations that discursively construct a PostHeimat imagined space in theatre practice.

PostHeimat Network

City theatre institutions of the network came together to respond to the consequences of migration to Germany after 2015, and each of the profiles provided in the book explains their motivations. A common feature is related to them being German-speaking ensemble theatres. Over decades, German-speaking cities’ cultural landscapes, which include network members’ activism, have been actively interacting with socio-political changes and creating meanings for migrant and refugee artists (see e.g. Tinius 2023). German theatre institutions perceive themselves as forums that host debates on the city’s socio-political and economic developments, such as in the Theater an der Ruhr, Maxim Gorki Theater, Münchner Kammerspiele, and others. Those institutions have been trying to introduce collaborative practices with precarious, “free”, and independent theatre scenes, working on thinking migrant and post-migrant theatre concepts to guarantee a third space of inclusion for diverse backgrounds (Sharifi, 2017), where theatre could allow decolonial confrontations with socio-political systems that have been dominating theatre spaces such as nationalism, populism, and Eurocentrism.

The PostHeimat network has some roots in the cultural engagements with the urban change following the migration wave to Germany in 1940 onward and the Wende. Theatre institutions began to weigh migration and diversity topics considerably. As debate forums, theatre institutions interacted with changes and realised the demand for similar changes to theatre structures as part of the urban transformation processes. Christopher-Fares Köhler provides in his essay how the term “post-migrant” society was coined from the post-migrant theatre movement and suggests

how Germany is in a constant transformation where migration is a driving force, and theatre is a catalyst of change around it.

Change is mainly advocated by artists, practitioners, and people, as well as their means of commenting artistically on their lives amidst hegemonic reiterations of a *Leitkultur*, which we contest in our essay on problematising the term “PostHeimat”. The change indicates two-sided transformation arrows in the theatrical scape, which are dependent on each other and are a reaction to each other. On the one hand, change at the level of conceptions of “Heimat” and “Belonging”. On the other hand, change at the level of theatre aesthetics. Despite many failed attempts, such transformative contexts continue to emphasise the role of theatre in debating, protesting, and creating narratives about forms of city transformation. As such, there is a need for theatre studies and practice to examine further potentials and define theatre’s role in dealing with the problematic site of transformation by tracing to understand landmarks of theatres’ contributions to the debate around urban transformations during the past century (Tinius 2019). Emerging from this need, the PostHeimat network is a project that emerged from theatre practice to reflect on its structures and feed back into its landscape. It is for that reason that we speak of the attempt to create and think about “networked solidarity”.

The PostHeimat network created a structure that enabled increasing debate through various encounters, organised almost four times a year at shifting locations but always connecting academics with theatre and civil society initiatives. These encounters were open to the public and comprised keynotes and contributions presented at various panels. Participants introduced diverse experiences to the discussion tables and exchanged opinions about theatre productions. The encounters also created working groups: the aesthetics working group, the research working group, and the cultural policies working group to enable in-depth, longer-term, and specialised discussions on various collective concerns of the network. The aesthetics working group focused on the performativity and practicalities of theatre practice, thinking about the important and also problematic developments of particular aesthetics in migrant and refugee theatre, while the research working group provided scholarly reflections and examinations related to work in practice, reviewing methodologies for collaborative, multimodal work between theatre, performance, and cultural policy. The cultural policy working group discussed an intersectional diversity act needed for a more diverse institutionalisation of theatre practice and how such a cultural policy proposal could be enacted, if at all. The working groups’ documentations in this book are considered a work in progress, open to new findings resulting from practice, and therefore deliberately unfinished in certain parts. Through these groups, the network becomes an activism movement and a learning journey, in the reflexive nature of the field, of all members against rigid policies. Beyond, it is a constant constructor of solidarity practices which result from the ongoing relational dynamics among its members.

This book attempts to reverse the academisation of the struggle of communities experiencing migration processes in the German-speaking theatre. It advocates the role of anthropological research of activism by holistically examining the case of theatre and migration from a plurality of narratives, witnessing voices on a collective movement that uses theatre practice as a tool for activism against normative discourses around 'home', 'diversity', and 'inclusion'. The network and the book try to realise a double gesture in the activism movement. It is a reflection and an ethical proposal for creating good conduct.

Who Tells a Story?

Theatre groups and groups of artists, scholars, and activists within the PostHeimat network engaged in artistic debates during the multiple encounters, creative processes, and internal administrative and artistic processes to direct their approaches in ways that would actualise the right to tell a personal story and construct narratives. The role of story-telling is essential for standing against power systems that control narratives and representations. The discourses in the theatres' portfolios provided for this book form the basis of the network's labour in this direction. The portfolios build a collective consensus on the importance of narrative exchange to maintain theatre as a debate forum which infuses relational aesthetics with a transformative reality and agenda. For example, the Boat People project's portfolio implies content that primarily deals with "diversity-sensitive topics and representations within the production teams that would potentially counter structural racism in the institution and contribute to the migration debate." The Münchner Kammerspiele's portfolio suggests that their welcoming projects for the newly coming non-German artists to Germany encourage an aesthetically progressive opportunity and endeavour for the theatre scene that contributes to a transnational theatre, where different narratives are shared and negotiated in the German institutional theatre settings. Institutional support for the theatre groups' approaches depended on funding sought, primarily by the Theater an der Ruhr, to bring life to the network's various activities. Nevertheless, these fundings follow cultural policies, which the essay by Özlem Canyürek critically examines. Canyürek provides that independent performing arts initiatives and networks operate under severe financial constraints, subsidised almost solely through project-based funding, which demands support from these policies to help manifest the fairness-based discourse on cultural diversity.

While the network's participating groups followed German cultural participation policy to promote diversified narratives despite bureaucratic regulations, individuals within these institutions, among activists and artists affiliated with them, question these policies. A network member, actress Javeh Asefdjah, asks in

one of the encounters panels, “Who is putting something into whose mouth? What is inexpressible to me? What speaks through me?” Actress Kenda Hmeidan asks herself while reflecting on her experience in one PostHeimat network encounter at the Maxim Gorki Theater, “Who is this person in me talking? I feel it is not myself.” Golshan Ahmad Haschemi, in another encounter, provides, “Now, while my wish would be that it is us, who shape, form and determine how and by whom these topics are tackled, the status quo tells a different story.” In a self-reflexive approach, the essay by Christopher-Fares Köhler demonstrates a practitioner-based conclusion on styles of narrations in contemporary German theatre: the first is *telling the story* where artists speak about their experiences on stage, sometimes even connecting it to a parable, a mythological story. The second is *refusing to tell the story*, where the story is used as a counter-argument, mainly by negating a specific representation. Canyürek’s essay explores a connection between individual artists’ and policymakers’ visions for developing and advocating a new non-discriminatory pluralistic discourse for the performing arts scene in Germany. The essay proposes criteria for ways of engaging with various axes of difference. One is concerned with narrating diverse experiences that would invite different types of stories not bound by a Western theatre canon.

Both the essays and artists’ contemplative moments relate to a view on institutions’ role in putting victim narratives on stage, which connects to Spivak’s concern in ‘Can Subaltern Speak?’ (1988). Essentialist underpinnings of information provided through artists’ representations on stage force narratives that reproduce relations of inequality and asymmetry, by homogenising migrant artists and leaving unequal power relations unaltered. The essays and artists’ contemplations explain how information provided within a story becomes more important than the story artists provide on stage. To support their solidarity agendas, institutions and audiences who need the information may neglect the story itself, how the artists narrate it, and hence their subjective intentions. Information becomes the priority of the institution and the driver of its discourse. For Walter Benjamin, information within a story “does not survive the moment in which it was new” (1968: 366). For Bala (2017), information within the story “must reveal everything as completely and efficiently as possible for it to be disseminated and replicated without error” (336). From here, replicating certain information or discourse in stage narratives cannot alter power relations, and focusing on it ceases to be effective in solidarity plights. A story, on the other hand, is different. Benjamin continues: “It does not expand itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and can release itself even after a long time” (366, see also Shibli 2024 on narration and the story-teller). Perceiving stories of migrants in such a way helps resume theatres’ role in reproducing subjective stories rather than guiding the information in their narratives. The PostHeimat network continuously emphasised questioning who narrates and what a narrative is. It also advocated how theatre practitioners work together to share a narrative

with the audience. This book practically investigates the need to examine what these produced narratives represent without cornering the reader with one defined answer.

Observing Observers

This book's guiding voices drive the PostHeimat network's activism towards an engaged ethnographic observation of what is observed in creative processes. In addition to artists' voices, the book comprises a variety of scholarly witnesses on the relational dynamics creating the conversation about diversity in theatre. These witnesses are complementary and decisive in imagining the network's mission. None of these voices is dispensable nor replaceable in creating the momentum of change and revealing system ruptures. Artists' witnessing confronts cultural policies and institutional mechanisms, including structures of racism and exclusion. Theatre institutions' witnesses are self-critical realities of harmonisation and attempts for change and inclusivity. Scholars' witnessing comprises processes of reflections on both.

Deep in this reflexive approach, essays by scholars in the book reflect on how cultural policies remain salient controllers of metanarratives that artists and institutions continuously re-examine and challenge, but often also need to operate with(in). Scholars' witnesses are mediating attempts to interpret and advocate artists' and institutions' practices towards their decolonising activism. Scholarship coinciding with network activism demonstrates that artists, including actors and actresses, dramaturgs, directors, and others, are activists who have engaged in intercultural interstices of the transnational space provided at theatre institutions. It provides that artists' engagement in intercultural spaces enables intersubjective relationships, creating strategies for constructing a third space of "beyondness" (Totah & Khoury, 2018). Whether through improvisations achieved or translation mechanisms, they developed these strategies for creating a third space that is comprised of moments of enduring-in-the-self being practised through various temporal and artistic scopes through improvisations. In these spaces, translating and interpreting intercultural and intersubjective dialogue enabled continuous solidarity construction in the relational dynamics of theatre (*ibidem*). These confrontational mechanisms to robust discourses are vital to realising what is beyond 'home' and Heimat.

Scholars also provide that home-making is a practical term for what artists endure during creative processes in a post-migrant theatre, opening space for discussions about Heimat. In addition to strategies that create a space of beyondness or "interstitial agency" (Tinius, 2019), artists' relational dynamics in transnational intercultural spaces include survival trajectories and strategies to re-establish a 'home' that can surmount the new national boundary, where they can find settlement and

belonging (Totah, 2021a, 2021b). Some of their trajectories include identifying with migration systems, where artists' repeated patterns of compromise, maneuver, and patience cope with estrangement resulting from forms of exile. Their trajectories also include disentanglement from emotional connections to the home country's collective entity and confrontation with cultural affiliations. These trajectories are contradictory, but artists experience them in parallel. Their trajectories explain how they have struggled to identify past nation-states' connections that may forge possibilities of finding a new 'home.'

This book is both a witness document and a proposal for thinking about Heimat after migration, and currently about return migration, and after a hegemonic and normative repurposing of Heimat itself, which we witnessed in the years after 2017. It emerges from an experiment in networked solidarity between major German-speaking theatres and migrant actors and directors, funded by the Kulturstiftung des Bundes. It documents the emergence, frictions, and difficulties in establishing a federal network of public migrant theatre initiatives at public theatre institutions and establishing reflexive, research-based, and cultural-policy-developing components and working groups through such a network. After years of encounters, plays, and working meetings, this book critically examines the *status quo* of these theatres and is open to a frank reflection on why some groups and projects could not function, or ceased to exist. Failure, discontinuity, and fragmentation are part of the landscape of publicly-funded German theatre; this book makes these experiences visible. Nevertheless, it also goes beyond the documentation of this process by inviting practitioners, scholars, activists, and artists to work on what artistic work *after* Heimat could mean. Including interviews, essays, cultural policy drafts, utopian imaginations, and biographical narratives, this book offers a critical view of migration, theatre, and networked solidarity in German society. Reading this book will reveal that more than one language is involved, and more than single or native English expressions and abilities are present in such an experiment. In the content of keynotes, encounters, talks, and essays, the English language is left with light editing to involve the reader in the experience and dynamics of communication between network members. It invites the reader into a witness-like document, as an open file on the experience and an ethnographic text open for multiple interpretations, in the same way that the network lived its experience. The book helps the public understand how this network came about, and what may remain of it. As we leave it open to explanations, we realise contextual reasoning for its emergence and the desire to create a network of producing companies involved in migration and *Flucht* in the German-speaking context. Lastly, introducing the network can be best done by the spoken words of its members, as they comment on what comes to their mind when hearing 'PostHeimat'. Responses, gathered on the brink of the Covid-pandemic at the Maxim Gorki Theater in 2020, came in several languages:

- 'Ruhrgebiet'
- 'Denke ich an einen Ort, wo lebe kann ohne Hass.'
- 'Overcoming nationalists, racists, and othering structures?'
- "قدرة الوطنية على تحقيق ذاتها وبعد ذلك الانطلاق لما هو أبعد من ذلك، بما يشمل حفظ الحريات
في التعبير، والابداع والتنوع"
- 'Ruhrorter'
- 'Verantwortung'
- 'First of all, it goes beyond the term of Heimat, which has a very negative connotation for me. So we do not need Heimat anymore. However, it also creates a different mindset for everyone to look at the terminology used in the present day.'
- 'Maxim Gorki'
- 'For me, it includes a vision for how we will shape the future.'
- 'Definition von Identität, jenseits von wo ich herkomme.'

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