

Transnational Theatre Encounters: Reflections on Mediation and Power

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In the past ten years, Syrian migrants' life stories have played on European stages, urging an anthropological query on migrant artists' transnational cultural experiences. In 2016, I started a research journey to understand how migrating artists from Syria formulated their cultural experiences in Europe. I based the query on the relationship between transnationalism and culture, which heightens issues of cultural freedom and is directly connected to the Arab uprisings. Before and after settling in Europe, migrating performing arts communities from Syria and other Arab countries ventured to stand against hegemonies on freedoms by emphasising discussions around nationalism and interculturalism. My anthropological research¹ delved into these discussions, connecting artists' subjectivities and free will with means of nationalising, de-nationalizing, and de-colonizing the national and transnational spaces they inhabit. The research explores how imperialism and its subsequent global systems, authoritative regimes, and solidarity spaces have furnished discussions on nationalism and influenced the development of artists' mobility and subjectivity. It provides that artists' transnational cultural experiences comprise homemaking trajectories and relational aesthetics (Totah 2020a, b), which became cases of interculturalism that hamper migrant artists' holistic subjectivity representations on stage and limit their investigation beyond their subject towards their free will (Totah 2021b).

At the beginning of my research journey, I felt that I was in a time machine travelling virtually through Palestine, Germany, and Syria in various historical moments during the thirties, forties and the last decade. These 'travels' revived various conceptions of nationalism that people held in these places, and they aided my analysis and understanding of the performance of transmigrants in Europe today. Encountering communities of various backgrounds challenged the assumptions and preconceptions that I brought to the research as an ethnographer and revealed a challenging connection with Western forms of anthropology. By constantly contemplating

1 This paper is partially drawn from my doctoral dissertation *Cultural Transnationalism and the Arab Uprising: Migrating Artists from Syria to Europe*.

and rethinking my conceptions, I aimed to define what Smith and Guarnizo (1998) provide as transnationalism from below while closely considering artists' specific historical contexts. Thus, I combined reflexivity and immersion approaches to lead a multi-site and non-Western-oriented bottom-up study of transnationalism. This method broke binaries and hegemonic conceptions when exploring transnational concepts beyond a general and unchallenged Western-oriented application of diversity and inclusion.

This article demonstrates how my position as an anthropologist affected the conclusions I stated above about artists' free will and their subjective development on European stages. The article provides counter-narratives from a non-Western perspective by demonstrating the value of biographicity and apprenticeship as ethnographic approaches and their relevance to specific moments during the Open Border Ensemble (OBE). It considers aspects of an anthropologist's positionality in the intercultural space of transnational theatre practice and reconsiders the margins of liminalities in this space.

My ethnographic research relies on formulations I concluded while spending time in Europe – primarily in Germany – since 2016. As a result of modernism, Western anthropology often focuses on realising the 'other' in its aesthetics and explanations. To the contrary, I aimed to understand smaller local narratives that may appear relevant to postmodernism from a non-European perspective. In this way, the artists' and author's narratives may be transformed into an activity in which politics, aesthetics, history, and interpretation converge. My research thus became an attempt at what Said called, 'continuing, protracted, and sustained adversarial resistance to the discipline and the praxis of anthropology (as representative of "outside" power) itself' (Said: 299). The grounded approach relatively broke the 'relationship of force between the outside Western ethnographer-observer and a primitive, or at least different but certainly weaker and less developed, non-Western society' (296). As such, I make conclusions on nationalism and subjectivity – where exile, gender, resilience, and homemaking are the main tools for breaking the dominant anthropological perspective. This analysis has challenged the definition of 'diversity' in spheres dominated by European theatre makers' perspectives by including non-European ones, and it contributes to expanding the discussion beyond the canonisation of the diversity approach in Europe. It provides an existential understanding of migration experiences in the creation of art by posing questions of mediality and translation.

Methodological Positionality and the Transcultural Space

The research was conducted during an apprenticeship within the performing arts sector in Germany and beyond² as the main site of empirical questioning and methodology. Data collection was completed using a variety of methods: biographical interviews, discussions during multiple meetings and the Post-Heimat meetings and encounters, and participant observations in two creative processes at the Münchner Kammerspiele and Schauspiel Hannover theatre organisations. At Münchner Kammerspiele, I observed the aesthetics of the theatrical productions of the OBE while the team prepared a trilingual theatre piece. However, my role evolved naturally into a practice approach, where I combined observations with support to the team, becoming an interpreter and an ‘advisor on dramaturgy’, as the team members called me several times. Thus, the experience developed into an apprenticeship approach, which suited the empirical methods by enriching my understanding of interculturalism and transnational theatre concepts. The ensemble also benefited from my dramaturgical and communicative support. Overall, it was a rewarding learning experience for all members of the group who participated in this transnational theatre experience.

The four-month apprenticeship included daily contact with artists from January to May 2018³. We spoke about the performance, coping with the weather, living conditions in the new country of Germany, sharing food, and attending other performances. During the first rehearsals, I regularly attended to observe the project team. Initially, I silently sat to the side, only observing, taking notes, and helping with some translations and interpreting. I was present daily with my notebook, and I clarified my note-taking purpose. As I answered questions about my notes, speaking the artists’ languages helped me forge unintentional bonds between us, which made the discussion about my role clearer. On the third day of rehearsal, I was asked to shift my role to an interpreter (Arabic-English-Arabic) due to the actual interpreter’s incompetence in (German-Arabic-German). My silent, note-taking observer role thus shifted into an active interpreter and cultural mediator role of daily one-on-one meetings, group improvisations, and translation of some texts. I wrote my reflections and notes during breaks or after the rehearsal sessions. I intended to do the interpreting only until another interpreter was found. However, the director indicated that the project team felt a need for the socio-political facilitation that I did, so I was asked to continue with the interpretation task. The artists had become

2 The research scope included Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, and Austria.

3 The artists were theatre actors and amateur dancers. The four-month apprenticeship, from January to May 2018, included daily contact with artists from Syria, Palestine and Germany who were chosen for their talent to participate in the OBE, whereas I arranged with the Münchner Kammerspiele to study the creative processes of the OBE.

accustomed to my interpretation style and were comfortable speaking freely with me. Some artists expressed that my presence gave them a sense of home, primarily through the culture-specific jokes and songs we shared. I was later asked to join the team on stage as a translator, but I expressed that it would not be possible.

Later, two weeks before the premiere, the team invented a 'wooden machine' for translation as a solution to the problem of translation in a trilingual performance. The wooden machine replaced me during the rehearsals, and I returned to being an observer. Three days before the premiere, the director decided to 'activate' my role, and I was again asked to give input on improvisations and texts in the final rehearsals. I helped finalise the Arabic versions of the texts, provided translations, and did some dramaturgical content advisory.

For the benefit of research material analysis, my apprenticeship at the Münchner Kammerspiele contributed to an in-depth understanding of the moments I observed. It also enabled rechecking of analysed moments and interviews as I continuously revisited my reflections and field notes to check the reasonability of my analysis. I also reflected upon questions concerning my participation in the artists' group and my position as their representative in the research discipline. Being aware of my sociocultural background, my anthropological representation relates to Said's description: 'bear[ing] as much on the representer's world as on who or what is represented' (2013: 303). My anthropological lens is thus dispersed throughout the totality of imperial history, modern conditions, and the postmodern gaze, all accumulating to form an understanding of the artists' and my transnational experiences. In the following section, I demonstrate aspects of reflexive ethnographic anthropology in studying various realities defused within the transnational performing arts experience at hand.

Interpreter as a Mediator Between Realities

During the apprenticeship, a reflexive reality emerged from my shifting role between an observer and a participant (interpreter). As an interpreter, I engaged fully during the rehearsals to the extent that I was once told, 'You are almost acting while interpreting, [you] danced as I did while interpreting, and you even sang it.' My immersion is un-biased by my cultural, linguistic, and political background – but contemplating my immersion enabled me to reflect on multiple possible realities of the intercultural space.

One reality emerged from my active interpreter role, where I mediated the relationships and understandings between the artists and the production team. The topics of improvisation were impacted by the interventions I was asked to provide, thus demonstrating a different reality than when my role was only to observe. Additionally, my role as an interpreter led to a different reality than that provided through

the silent but unignored central position of the 'wooden' translation machine that replaced me on stage. Despite the many distortions that any translation process could cause in a theatre performance, all members agreed that translation/interpretation was central to this performance and any other transnational work environment. Hence, immersion in the practice of interpreting enabled a reflexive reality and established closer contact with the improvised material. It engaged me, the researcher, with the emotional state of the artist being interpreted and promoted a trusting relationship with the team that facilitated observation and later interviews. Interpretation turned the research method into an apprenticeship by providing a mutual learning experience.

However, my inability to be a human interpreter present on stage challenged the dramaturg and the artistic choices that were made. Rehearsals about memories and personal stories shifted once the silent wooden machine's unavoidable central position replaced the translator on stage. The machine was physically and symbolically huge enough to drive improvisations around it, allowing for stories centred around the wooden machine's story. In a way, the wooden machine conquered the space on stage and created a new reality by obliging the artistic team to find a way to adapt to its physical and symbolic presence as the metaphorical elephant in the room. Although the artists did not discuss the machine's usefulness, they all engaged in finding ways to improvise around its presence. Their memories about machines and German machines' reputations were brought to the improvisation process. Here, I realised how my absence as an interpreter-mediator infused the shift from intersubjective connections among the artists and production team concerned with subjectivity development in the intercultural space to post-migrant-led intersubjective connections that constitute artists' representations on stage. The shift had moved the intercultural self-exploring medium to an intercultural self-exploring medium led by the context's demands. These demands of context, which aimed to create a space of beyondness (the post-migrant space reality), left behind an essential component of the self as unexplored – the one being explored in the process before the machine appeared. To avoid the machine's centrality and create mediation between the Arab-speaking artists and the audience without relying fully on the machine, the director led the improvisation process towards having the German actor play the role of interpreter for the audience, recreating the context dominion into a White-Western dominion. The result was thus a dominated intercultural space.

Within this dominated intercultural experience, theatre as a collaborative space enabled mediativity to thrive. The interpreter's role as a cultural mediator between the German and non-German participants – whether it was the German artist or me – was crucial in creating a bridge between ideas, inviting similar grounds where thinking and ideas could emerge, and enabling artists to focus on other aesthetics connected to style, improvised moments, and content. Additionally, many aspects of the improvisations in the intercultural space focused on artists interpreting – through

different styles of their choice – what their colleagues produced in the dramatic moment. These interpretations may have been for reasons of solidarity, mockery, or playfulness in the improvisational mode. The whole performance became a space of mediality of artists' various ideas and memories, communicated to each other and the audience. In some cases, the artists preferred not to interpret, mediate, or use mediation – rather, they improvised beyond what their colleagues and the translation produced. These improvisations beyond the system of rehearsals required further translation and cultural explanations. However, these mediality processes could not transcend Western dominance of the intercultural space.

Observer as a Mediator of Intercultural Spaces

Three physical spaces in the creative process contributed to my ethnography's anthropological understanding through reflexivity and immersion. These were the general rehearsal location, the smoking room, and the ice-breaking game corner. The rehearsal and performance locations were outside the theatre premises, in the city's suburbs. The choice of the location, which the theatre administration made, was intentional. Almost all members of the artistic team complained – to me, first, but then to the theatre administration – about its remoteness and the inability to create intercultural spaces with the other ensemble members of the theatre institution. Despite artists' complaints, however, the answer was always that nothing was to be done.

The second location, the ice-breaking game corner, was created within this rehearsal location. This was a space where the artistic team played a 'game' in which one of the performers proposed encouraging daily exercise before the rehearsal began. (The performer who proposed this later left the project because of dissatisfaction with the production's approach to solidarity.) The game used a ball and four connected squares drawn on the floor to form one larger square. Four artists or team members could play at a time. Each stood in one of the squares and passed the ball with one hand to the person in the next square without the ball touching the ground twice or touching the body. The game, independent of language, built a solid communicative channel between the artists and revealed challenges among them. Fuelled by the need to exercise before each rehearsal, the regularly played game enhanced individual communication and helped solve some uneasy moments. The game became an intercultural issue solution and an energetic vein in the highly unliked and cold rehearsal location. The game's continuation after the performer's departure brought to my mind, and likely to others as well, the reasons for his leave. The game was based on complementary efforts and players' competence, whereas the play was based on mediality.

The third location was also part of the rehearsal space: the smoking room. In addition to the artistic team's official meeting table, this alternative space revealed unofficial tensions that emerged during the creative process. Artists usually moved to the smoking room to smoke a cigarette. However, I observed that the Arabic speakers and German speakers often chose to use the smoking room at different times. These group splits were spontaneous at times and intentional at others to discuss dissatisfaction issues. The smoking room eased the language shifting at the smoking room (mostly spoken Arabic) and at the meeting table (mostly spoken German). Whenever the split happened, it appeared to be a mechanism to handle or take a break from intercultural disparities.

Additionally, a new layer of explanation of the smoking room emerged when a female Arabic-speaking artist joined the team and used the room to smoke a cigarette. As tensions with the female artist heightened on a professional, character basis, the male participants lessened their visits to the room when she was around. They visibly shifted their smoking to the men's changing room. As an Arabic-speaking team member, I was once invited to a private talk with the female participant in the smoking room. She confided that she found communicating with the male performers difficult and was thinking about leaving. Haunted by preconceptions about gender relations, I played a supporting role, encouraging her to continue until the end, despite the various pressures. I was also invited to the men's changing room to discuss the male artists' dissatisfaction with the director's strategy, the female artist, and translation issues with the dramaturg. I played a listening role there and encouraged them to speak their minds. These dynamics taking place in and in relation to the smoking room revealed that several canonisations and categorisations played a role in the intercultural experience, even within an environment of solidarity. Several discussions with the German-speaking group members revealed other tensions and perceptions of the state of the group. However, these were never brought to the official table or to the smoking room.

In summary, the interpreter and observer roles I played during my immersion and apprenticeship at the theatre project contributed to shaping the research outcome and formulating my strategies for analysing the experiences of migrant artists. The transcultural, intercultural, and cultural issues of the three physical spaces and the relational space between them illuminated that a post-migrant space comprises components of analysis beyond the mere experience of living together. A post-migrant space concerns the history of artists' subjective experiences and my experiences in the field of performing arts. Moreover, in a post-migrant intercultural context, translation becomes a salient component to directing, manipulating, and leading mechanisms of managing differences between individuals.

To better understand individuals' own perspectives of their experiences, biographical interviews shed light on the artists' feelings and experiences. The following

sections demonstrate the findings of this research's ethnography and biographical interviews in relation to the transnational cultural experiences of the artists.

Making Biographicity of Artists

Biographical interviews formed one of my primary data collection methods. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 artists over two years (2017–2019). Each interview revolved around one question: 'Every one of us has a story. What is your story?' To answer this, artists extensively narrated personal life stories and focused on their stories of engagement in art and theatre. Through follow-up questions to encourage openness to share stories, I informed the artists about previous research related to the Palestinian and Arab performing arts scene from the late twentieth century until now. Sharing my own perspective infused further sharing of stories and incidents related to common knowledge of Arab performing arts. It also helped artists reflect and connect their current stories with past moments and build on conclusions throughout the interview. The interviews were mainly conducted in Arabic and took place at artists' workspaces, theatres, and cafés, which are public spaces where the surrounding majority spoke a language other than Arabic. Language furthered harmony in the interview, even if the shared stories would not change if the surrounding people understood the language. This created an unintentional connection between me and the artist during the meetings.

Biographies collected in this manner have been described by Rosenthal (1997) as narrated life stories where artists demonstrate the meaning of experiences and include the temporal order of the life story in the present time of narrating or presenting it. The biographies included stories, reflections, conclusions, moments of hesitation, and momentous realisations, which led to the research's investigation of complex multi-scalar social fields (Totah 2020a) and aided in the construction of migrant artists' biographies. Their self-development through narrating their life stories constituted their biographicity (Totah 2021a), which is the process reflecting their ability to shape and reshape their story about their transnational experiences. The context of their biographicity construction in such an interview setting demonstrates the common spatial and historical grounds that the interview established, combining the artist's experience with the anthropologist's. It could be described as a space of reconnecting or personification (through myself) of the confrontation with home. Artists' self-development journeys comprised my presence with theirs, interweaving with shared concerns about the social structure that made our meeting possible. For example, the concepts of dictatorship and censorship were familiar to us both, creating a connection that was used to clarify difficult points during the interview.

Within artists' biographicity, the narration brought both the anthropologist and artist into a common level of liminality. It established a shared liminal space that continuously referred to the artwork as a social event. Both the artists and the anthropologist contributed to establishing the liminal space with the spectator. Both referred to the past with its connection with the present in its interpretation. The liminal space established the relational space of theatre as a social event, which includes an aspect of the past and the present, referred to as biographical narrations' 'problematic sites of contemporaneity' (Totah 2021 b). As such, the liminal space of the transnational theatre experience challenged an understanding of the migration experience as simply the process of travel. Rather, it is holistically constructed by relying on the overall artistic and social experiences of artists as humans in a migration context.

Transnational Theatre Research: Biographicity and Apprenticeship

My methodological positionality brings into discussion the extended explanations by Bourriaud (2002) and Wannous (1996) on how relational aesthetics is a modernist form of art relations, participation, and exchange that advocates social change. By calling the artwork a 'social interstice' (5), Bourriaud (2002) proposed that relational aesthetics seeks to expand the understanding of art by inviting human relations around it, including its production and its reception, instead of limiting it to independent and private symbolic spaces (5). In contrast to society's increasing functionality against finding relational spaces under global contingencies, artwork can create such a relational space. Art involves intersubjective encounters resulting from themes of togetherness. Politically, this art form situates relational aesthetics around it in the liminal space between aesthetics and politics, and it rejects the aesthetic autonomy that distinguishes pure and political art. Thus, art as a political form transforms relational aesthetics into a process that resists art commodification by the cultural industry. It utilises artists' biographicity – in the case of Arab artists in Europe – as a tool for resisting. This art simultaneously turns the anthropologist into a political agent against pre-set research design.

Specifically, the transnational cultural experience of migrant artists becomes relational through their intercultural experiences, which comprise their intersubjective encounters around boundaries and physical borders, as well as their connections with their home country. It also includes my perceptions as an accompanying researcher. The dialogue that the artwork creates throughout what Bourriaud explains as the 'being-together' experience (8) produces negotiations and confrontations around both the self and the environment, which form the artistic practice's quintessence. In this case, the anthropologist shares the responsibility that artists

hold towards others in this dialogue, which is their representation of the artwork's desired world and its meaning.

In the same sense, Wannous 1996 viewed theatre as a 'social event' in which bonds between an actor and the audience lead to the theatrical phenomenon. He considered that theatre production creates a fertile collective feed. The production does not merely collect individual efforts but also creates a rich dialogue and collaborative creation that gradually reveals the group's identity. In the case of the OBE, as the relational dynamics of the performing artists' transnational experiences constituted the social interstice or the social event, the anthropologist joined the collective force. Inducing understanding of the interaction around artists' legal, cultural, and social status occurred through their homemaking trajectories and biopolitical performativity, resulting from in-depth discussions of past, present, and liminal spaces (Totah 2021b). These interactions and discussions contributed to their onstage biographic representations and meanings. By recreating this social interstice throughout their migration, the artists aimed to reclaim their free will. The anthropologist, in this case, contributed to the biographicity of artists but was not able to contribute to their free will. Such a state of contribution is also worth further exploration if the anthropologist is from a Western background, which I am not. This means that the transnational dynamics of togetherness in a relational aesthetic space, in the here and now, are constantly confronted by the social fields' powers, where they take place and do not achieve utopia.

On the other hand, when artwork introduces confrontation, Bishop describes this as 'antagonistic relational aesthetics', which reveals new perceptions of subjectivity revolving around 'the presence of what is not me renders my identity precarious and vulnerable, and the threat that what the other represents transforms my sense of self into something questionable' (66). Antagonistic aesthetics calls for questioning the quality of the relationships in the transnational theatre space and the democratic meaning behind the dialogue it allows by revealing tensions, exploitations, subversions, and works against quality. The migrant performing artists' relational dynamics comprise aspects of Bishop's antagonism. They are situated in an intercultural, transnational context, where multiple levels combine to create the being-together experience. As they emerged from the multiple realities explained earlier, the relational dynamics that artists experienced in the transnational social field are antagonistic on many levels, including their relationships with peer artists, the director, and the audiences. As a mediator for reflexivity and a liminal companion, the anthropologist contributed to confrontations by enhancing artists' agency in the intercultural space. Artists' dynamics in the creative process consisted of intercultural strategies and encounters. However, post-migrant solidarity dominions explained earlier stood against the capability of the creative process to excel with the antagonistic relational aesthetic spaces that may transcend artists' subjects towards their freedom. As such, understanding the antagonistic aesthetics of a social event

must intersect with a political understanding of power dynamics and the transnational social field of artists' experiences to better target intercultural relationships between artists.

This paper demonstrated how my position as an anthropologist affected my analysis and conclusions about artists' free will and their subjectivity development on European stages. By focusing on demonstrating biographicity and apprenticeship as ethnographic approaches, as well as their relevance to specific moments during the OBE, this paper introduced the multiplicity of roles the anthropologists assumed in conducting transnational theatre research. In conclusion, in an attempt to challenge Western hegemony, an anthropologist becomes a political agent against pre-set research design. In an intercultural space, the anthropologist shares artists' responsibility towards others and simultaneously contributes to reality-making. An anthropologist may contribute to the biographicity of artists but is not able to contribute to their free will because transnational relational dynamics of togetherness in a relational aesthetic space are constantly confronted by the social fields' powers and dominions.

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