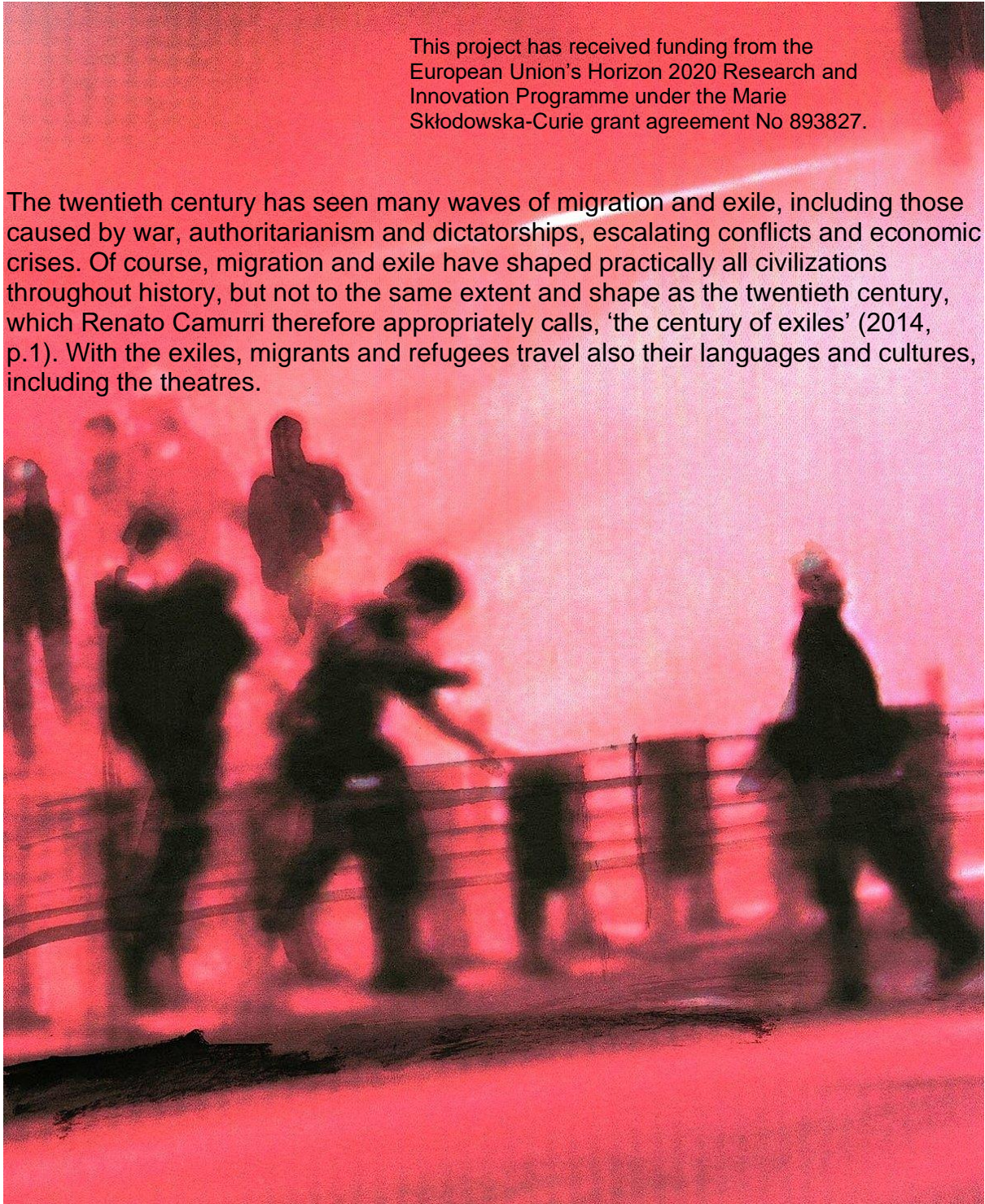


EXILED LIVES ON THE STAGE: TURKEY'S ARTISTS AT THE CROSSROADS OF NEW AESTHETIC PRACTICES AND POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITIES

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The twentieth century has seen many waves of migration and exile, including those caused by war, authoritarianism and dictatorships, escalating conflicts and economic crises. Of course, migration and exile have shaped practically all civilizations throughout history, but not to the same extent and shape as the twentieth century, which Renato Camurri therefore appropriately calls, 'the century of exiles' (2014, p.1). With the exiles, migrants and refugees travel also their languages and cultures, including the theatres.



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In the present chapter¹, I will be looking at the works and practices on the theatre stage by Turkish artists who have left Turkey recently for Europe, under varying circumstances as President Erdoğan's rule has become more autocratic and the country has been sliding into economic and political crises. This regional focus is informed by my own experience, since I previously lived and worked in Turkey, where I lived through the political events from the Gezi Park uprising in 2013 up until the post-coup witch hunt in 2017. The latter caused my Turkish partner and me to lose our jobs and to move away for security reasons due to our support of the peace petition, titled 'We Will Not Be a Party to This Crime', which drew public's attention to the acts of violence perpetrated by the state in the Kurdish regions of Turkey. Thus, this research comes from a place of practical risk and a profound need to start collecting the voices and works by Kurdish and Turkish theatre practitioners and other artists in response to urgent cultural, political and aesthetic debates.

OPENING UP THE STUDY OF EXILES

Despite the latest interests in postmigrant theatre in Berlin, which has a clear connection to the Turkish migrant communities and history, Turkish exilic history is still largely neglected were it not for the literary works of Turkish-German theatre actress and author Emine Sevgi Özdamar. Exile studies have predominantly focused on German-language exiles, particularly through *Exil und Migrationsliteratur*, with only sporadic contributions of post-cold war Eastern Europe since the mid-1980s (see for instance, Ballinger, 2002; Radulescu, 2002; Rosenbaum 2018). Despite a paradigmatic change observed by Ernst Loewy in 1991 and later by Koepke and Thuncke (2004), *Exilforschung* has been largely Eurocentric: "The discipline ... ignores displacement, abduction, enforced migration, and exile as phenomena that permeate the *whole of human history*" (qtd. in Scheduling, 2010, p.127). Only in more recent years, due to an upsurge of migration waves in tandem with newly emerging authoritarian regimes, we see an interest in the theatre to react and give artists at risk a temporary place, be it in the margins of our institutions, to turn their experiences into powerful expressions of the stage.

One recent example is the Ukrainian dramatist Pavlo Arie, who was the dramaturg-in-chief of the Left Bank Theatres in Kyiv before the Russian attacks on Ukraine: from September 2022, he curated the cultural salon, "Stories from Exile" at the Berliner Ensemble. Prior to the Ukrainian urgency, the Exil Ensemble was founded in 2016 at the Gorki Theater with exiles from Syria, Palestine and Afghanistan. All the while, a silent exodus of artists from Turkey had been set in motion ever since the backlash of the Gezi Park protests, in search for safer places to continue their work. By looking at the theatre works of 'new wave' artists from Turkey, we do not only discover similarities in the 'exilic performative' between different national contexts but we can also add new cultural perspectives to the study of exile, extending the archives over time. What interests me particularly in this project, is how exilic theatre can be a compass for our current democratic institutions and the political configuration we live by today.

In German Exile Studies, born out of a necessity of European intellectuals, mostly German-language Jewish exiles², to document their escape from Nazi-fascist persecutions in the 1930s (see, for instance, Krohn, 1998; Conway & Cotovitch, 2001), theatre has often been regarded as a tool to alleviate the experience of

fracture, injury, displacement and loss, either through entertainment or memory of the canon in the native language as part of a gradual integration and acculturation in the new home. In Austrian archives on exile, like the Miller Archive which I visited at the Senate House Library in London for instance, one can find many examples of German cabaret and theatre abroad like *Das Laterndl* which was a theatre by and for first arrivers, mainly refugees in London, who wanted to keep Viennese theatre traditions alive as part of their struggles for a free and independent Austria. It was mainly visited by the Austrian community with full houses from its opening in 1939. In a decade, you would see how gradually the plays become more multilingual, but the interest would start to wane as émigrés went gradually back to Austria. Within Germany, we have seen migrant groups opening theatres for comparable reasons, a considerable group being the artists with Turkish migration backgrounds ever since the Gastarbeiter arrived in Germany in the 1960s. Remaining theatres from the previous waves of Turkish migration, such as *Tiyatrom* (since 1984, currently temporarily closed) and *Theater28* (since 2010) in Berlin, have contributed to an infrastructure for new generations as well as a continuity of the Turkish canon for Turkish speaking audiences, while their programs have also been bilingual.³ Yet new wave artists are either finding a home on post-migrant stages like the Maxim Gorki Theatre, or in the independent scene, like *Gastkollektiv* at Oyoun or *Mîrza Metîn's Şermola Germany* (founded in Bonn) at TAK in Berlin.

No doubt, within the current state of politics, there is also an overlapping interest in theatre studies to look at forms of refugee theatre. And the connection certainly begs for reflection on what Zygmunt Bauman has called the 'dialectic' between exile and refugee as constitutive of liquid modernity: "Liquid modernity is made up of exiles and refugees which have very different functions. One is on the side of emancipation, the other on the side of suffering; one determines and resists while the other is functionless and placeless; one thinks critically while the other is 'pulped into a faceless mass' and barely lives" (Cheyette, 2020, p.78). Exile allows then for a discussion of a larger structural feeling that many people share today, as part of our shared 'liquid modernity', not only by those who have left but also those who stayed. This sense of self-exile in contrast to cases of political refugees is often brought up in the interviews that I conduct, including in the podcast, *Exiled Lives*, that I started during the pandemic.⁴

THE EXILIC PERFORMATIVE

One production in which the exilic performative manifests is *Rawestgeharaf/Zwischenhalt/Aradurak* ('Stopover')⁵ by Kurdish theatre artist *Mîrza Metîn* for *Şermola Performans* and the *Fringe Ensemble*, which went into premiere at Istanbul's *Kumbaracı50* on 17 February 2017. *Mîrza Metîn* wrote the play initially in Turkey in the aftermath of the post-coup emergency situation, though he developed it further for his residency at Bonn's *Fringe Ensemble*, supported by the *Martin Roth Initiative*. The play sets around three passengers (one Kurdish, one Turkish and one German) who find themselves all waiting in somewhat Beckettian situation at a nameless and placeless bus stop, represented by a simple wooden bench on an empty black-box theatre stage, for a bus that never comes, while a storm is approaching.

The reiteration of that storm in the text creates the impression that it must be a metaphor, a mythological sign for something else. In the storm, one could recognize the looming threats that caused artists, academics and journalists to leave Turkey. But for Mîrza Metîn, as he explained in a recent interview⁶, it clearly meant also something bigger. When asked about the metaphor, he reflected on the storm as something that many civilizations share with the Kurds, who have a long history of displacement. He connects that with a larger world history of oppression from colonialism, which he recognizes in the decades-long treatment of the Kurds in Turkey, who have been oppressed culturally, socially and linguistically under the hegemony of modern Turkey. Resonating with Fanon (1961), he sees the Kurdish struggle not as a struggle for individual autonomy but as a collective force that connects all the historical oppressed and 'wretched of the earth'. And this is something that Mîrza Metîn came to realize more while being intellectually stimulated by his residency in Bonn.

Though technically not in exile, he came to realize his life as a double exile, first when he moved with his family from Kars to Istanbul at age three, which made him unlearn Kurmanji. The historically nation-wide assimilation of Kurds, the underappreciation of artists from the East in cultural centres like Istanbul and the looming existential threat of the Kurdish language and culture in Turkey made him an exile in his own country. In his adolescent life, he relearned Kurmanji and all its relevant dialects in Turkey, which he reflects back in his theatre texts, putting theatre in Kurdish back on the map with the theatre Şermola Performans that he co-founded with Berfin Zenderlioğlu as Destar Theatre in 2008 in Istanbul. The loss of language, identity and access became even more prevalent in his life when he arrived in Germany and felt his language was irreparably broken, when trying to fit in and to make friends. He was reminded of the anger inside of him in Germany due to the white gaze he experienced in his professional environment.

In the opening scene, we see a Turkish man speaking of his urge to simply go away as the best option, to find a job, to stay low until the storm calms down, and perhaps return or maybe not. He also questions how to leave since everything he is, is there, wherever there may be. Upon his answer to simply leave without being noticed, he then takes out a hand puppet from his pocket, which he calls Zift, and starts talking to it. The whole scene reminded me of one of Turkey's earliest literary expressions of exile in Yaşar Kemal's tetralogy *Bir Ada Hikayesi* [The Story of an Island] that recounts the population exchange after the signing of the Lausanne Treaty in 1923 in literary form. On one occasion, a character in the first volume, named Vasili who had hid himself on his home island when all his fellow Greek islanders were forced to leave, "speaks to a cat on the island as if it were his friend and tells it about his painful experiences in those wars" (qtd. in Çulhaoğlu, 2017, p.48). In Mîrza Metîn's poetic world, myths and animals play an important role as Kurdish literature pulls its strengths from it, as a shared cultural memory among displaced Kurds. By a simple hand puppet role-play, he splits the voice in a dual perspective thereby letting the exiled reflect on his current situation fleeing the storm while trying to comfort himself around his future into the unknown.

DUAL PERSPECTIVE

Many cultural theorists have described this dual perspective as constitutive of the exilic experience. The exiled is then often defined as a contentious subject position that is constituted between at least two languages and/or places in terms of a perpetual 'becoming' and 'multiple belonging'. The exilic experience is commonly defined as being 'home away from home', bearing a double consciousness and perspective on the home and receiving country or city while illuminating the exile's own subjectivity (Said, 1996; Gilroy, 1992). Precisely because of that double consciousness, seminal writers such as Zygmunt Bauman, particularly after his own 1968 Polish exile, have designated the exilic life situation as a window to time, to modernity, to struggle. In a well-known essay, Edward Said wrote that "exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (Said, 2000, p.137). And he goes on to ask: "But if true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching motif of modern culture? [...] Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees" (ibid.).

In a similar vein, Bauman has taken the exilic position as a contentious point to critique national state borders and the dangers of totalitarianism, in spirit similar to one of Bauman's famous interlocutors, Hannah Arendt and her ideas on the political exiles who fled the Nazi regime (1941): 'Refugees from every nation, driven as they are from country to country, have become the avant-garde of their own people' (Arendt, 2007[1941], p.141; qtd. in Cheyette, p.73). This surely confirms the necessity to look carefully at the current silent exodus from Turkey, yet such conceptualizations of the exile and the refugee are also modelled in a more abstract sense and agenda upon a philosophical tradition that looks at the migrant as an intellectual property that challenges ideas of power and identity from within the own cultural paradigm and value system. Cultural theorists have then often described the exiled as a cultural 'hybrid' or 'cosmopolitan citizen of the world', as a special position for reflection on political developments and altering value systems in different national and urban contexts, whilst their precarity and vulnerability can also raise awareness when it reaches the Arendt's space of appearance and repeated presence within that (to which this study is also contributing to) (Marciniak, 2006). In a larger perspective, like Bauman's, the exiled even came to stand for the whole modern human condition: "I came to believe that the non-sequiturs, ambiguities, contradictions, incompatibilities, inconsistencies and sheer contingencies for which human thoughts and deeds are notorious should not be viewed as temporary deficiencies... They are rather the crucial, constitutive features of the human modality of being in the world" (Jacobsen & Poder, 2008, p.235; qtd. in Cheyette, p.74). In a similar way, Mîrza Metîn recognizes in the metaphorical storm the plight of all oppressed and displaced peoples in a universal way, like Bauman and his 'conceptual Jew' as "universal 'viscosity' of the Western world" (Bauman, 1989, p.40; qtd. in Cheyette, p.78).

AFFECTIVE HISTORIES

Among my interlocutors I observe a disparity of reasons in recent years why Turks and Kurds have been relocating to Germany and other parts of the world, while still relating to a general sense of exile or self-exile even when the displacement has no clear political or legal reasons. Most relate to the decline of civic space since the Gezi protests in 2013 and the July 15 coup attempt in 2016, which led to the curbing of freedoms, including the freedom of association, assembly and expression, as well

as a steady decline of democracy and civil society. Following figures provided by CIVICUS, Pınar Akpınar reported in 2018 that the two-year state of emergency (2016-2018) led to the shutdown of more than 1,400 associations with parliamentary decrees, 151,967 layoffs, 136,995 detainments with 77,524 people arrested. 5,822 academics lost their jobs, and 319 journalists were arrested in Turkey on grounds of alleged links to the attempted coup (Akpınar, 2019, p.62). Moreover, 15 universities were closed and whole departments were purged, like the Department of Theater at Ankara University that lost almost of all its faculty. The seeming randomness of the decrees and the arbitrariness of the layoffs played a hand. As a result of this climate and politics of fear, mediated by a crude propaganda offensive that normalized every dramatized political event into an issue of the state-organized purge, many decided to leave.

The most prominent examples in the performing art institutions were the closure of many Kurdish institutions after the coup. Private theatres also suffered, as Adak and Altınay (2018) reported, like Barış Atay's Emek Theatre in Kadıköy that was briefly put under quarantine in January 2018 due to his performance of Onur Orhan's *Sadece Diktatör* (Just a Dictator), which explored the social and political factors that produce dictators and keep them in power in a long monologue that directly addresses the audience. Although the play ran for years already since 2015, in the wake of an upcoming election the emergency regulations were used to ban the play across Turkey, despite a court ruling, after governors of Artvin and Hopa in northern Turkey had banned it earlier that month. In response, a call for a live-reading to reclaim the play was launched by Kadıköy Theaters Platform, after which the play was read by theatre groups in several locations, on Twitter over Periscope, and on different radio stations, even in Kurdish. The initiative was supported by the 'Do Not Touch My Theatre' Platform (Öztüran, 2018). This case shows that, despite the dynamics of oppression and the risk of public scrutiny, artistic production is not completely curtailed and it also, at times, still inspires performances of resistance. Barış Atay also brought the performance to Germany, where he showed it first at Theater28 and later at the Maxim Gorki Theatre, which functions as a major hub for artists from Turkey though the demand is overstressing them. HAU, Bi-Bak, Radialsystem (with its #disPlaced-#rePlaced program) as well as the Akademie der Künste have also occasionally supported artists from Turkey, on project and residency basis.⁷

In DW (Deutsche Welle), Atay is quoted saying: "If today we are already too fearful to say some things, we must realize that it will soon be impossible to say anything at all" (qtd. in Acer, 28 Jan. 2018). We hear a similar battle cry in the play #WeAreArrested (2019) by the exiled Berlin-based Turkish journalist Can Dündar, titled after his final tweet from the courtroom before his imprisonment: "I ask myself if I'm afraid. But I know that fear breeds silence. And we have a responsibility to speak out before silence takes hold" (RSC, 2018, p.68). Can Dündar was arrested in November 2015 and later sent to prison for publishing footage of weapons being sent by Turkish intelligence services to rebel fighters in Syria. The play was adapted from Dündar's memoir, *We Are Arrested* (2016) by Pippa Hill and Sophie Ivatts; the latter also directed the play for the RSC's Mischief festival in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2018, which was then taken up in the repertoire of Arcola Theatre in Hackney in 2019. The play did add to a self-fashioning of Can Dündar's persona as a freedom fighter yet it also celebrated the power of words and the struggle for freedom of

speech, or as we hear Can Dündar musing in his prison cell: “My mind is made up: I will transform this dungeon into a microphone, make my voice heard as far as it will reach” (ibid., p.108-9).

‘PERMANENT TEMPORARINESS’

Following Judith Butler’s line of reasoning, the vulnerability of the self-exiled in the face of a stifling civic space in Turkey can be mobilized and mobilizing in terms of an act of resistance, revealing the interdependency of places like Turkey and Germany, but it also adds on new layers of vulnerability as we know from migration and refugee studies. Many interlocutors report of a living and work situation that can be best described as a permanent temporariness, as proposed by Bailey et al. (2002): “both the static experience of being temporary (i.e., in suspended legal, geographic, and social animation, and so on) and the secretion of strategies of resistance (strategic visibility) in the acquired knowledge that such temporariness is permanent” (qtd. in Collins, 2011, p.322). This underpins the belief that that which immobilizes exiles, like the suspended legal status, can become a force for action and reaction, for movement through tactics of active resistance in their daily lives or in artistic expressions.

At this point, I think it is useful to acknowledge the urban context in which self-exiled artists reside since the exilic experience is foremost a spatial one. Looking at the policies and cultures of support that certain cities, like Berlin, and their ‘affective societies’ have nurtured, I suggest to embrace Alexis Nouss’ observation on the exilic city (which was also the topic of my first podcast episode on “Exiled Lives”):

“The city knows nothing of exile. This can be understood in two ways. First, the city ends exile by receiving the exiled subject and erasing his or her exilic condition or retaining it only as folklore. In offering asylum and refuge, the city bestows a new identity on the exiled, which for an artist can mean acquiring a specific profile. ... Second, the city can welcome the exiled but not exile. Home excludes whatever lies outside it. In the urban order, there is a place for everyone, and everyone has a place. However, exile is precisely an absence of place, in not only its empirical but also its metaphysical dimension: exile declares the impossibility of place” (Nouss, 2016, p.143).

Cities and metropolises have become more important over the years in affecting domestic policy but also in the management of the greater influx of people, since the refugee crises, so it is interesting to understand that cities have the capacity to welcome exiled and self-exiled but it does not deal with ‘exile’ as such, as this affective realm lies outside of its borders, outside its current urban order. The lived experience of cities by exiles is indeed often one of a lack of place, of not quite fitting, or finding a place to continue on the life and career pathways that were once imagined. Nouss points to a historical paradox here as cities are much the work of exile, though “the urban order must erase any trace of exile to ensure its vocation... based on principles of permanence, durability, and immutability, a stasis that shares its dogma with the state” (p.144). This self-claimed durability on the part of the city stands in contrast to the permanent temporariness of many of its citizens.

Nouss' quote also talks of identity, of the exiled self. I see resemblance of that idea with Yana Meerzon's *Performing Exile, Performing Self* (2012), namely in how the destabilization caused by the exilic living situation demands to be "worked through" in creative ways, through the 'exilic performative' that produces a new kind of artist identity ('performing the act of self-fashioning') and new works that can be characterized by self-reflexivity, hybridity of styles, and a tendency to avoid representational form. This is in contrast to the rather bleak musings of the exilic situation, as we find in many literatures on the topic. Notwithstanding the underlying psychoanalytical or even therapeutic aspirations that are ascribed by Meerzon to the work of exiled artists, I am questioning how much of this is actually produced by expectations that are brought upon from the art community or even governments, rather than from a profound reflection on the self, or on the identity of the exiled artist.

From a policy perspective, Carola Tize (2020) describes in this respect how Germany's longstanding attitude towards migrants as temporary and transient, starting with the Gastarbeiter between 1955 and 1973, and particularly confirmed after the fall of the Berlin wall with the need to control the influx of 'foreigners' to secure the German identity and social unity, led to a concept like Ketten-Duldung (chain tolerance) which often refers to those whose toleration status is particularly insecure, long-lasting or has no end in sight, but whose repeated approvals of short-term permission to stay adds another 'link' to the toleration chain. With the memory of the 1930s and Turkey's present state of politics, one can understand how Germans are welcoming now a new diaspora of mostly white-collar Turks as a permanent temporariness to appear in their civic landscape, while it also serves their image as a tolerant country at the political center of the European Union. But within that policy climate, migrant artists have been often instrumentalized, fetishized or led to a self-fashioning – and thereby domestication – in their struggle to end their permanent becoming in that chain tolerance, both as tokens of citizenship and as artistic labourers who are dealing with racial inequality and the glass ceiling on a daily basis.

This perpetual becoming of the exile, as indicative of our liquid modernity, is even more tragic when it is inscribed in border-control policies like in temporary protective measures and strategies, including temporary residence status and temporary access to employment, where the temporariness of the migrants is actually appealing to governments. The similarity with precarious work or temp labour in our current neoliberal job markets is not coincidental.

MODELS FOR A REALITY

Exilic life and the exiled can give us a moment to pause and look at our own fragile state of democracy. Their theatres can offer us representations that are not mere reflections of a social reality beyond ourselves. They can be models for a reality, where the workings of aesthetics and performative affects aim to impact our debates of community, conviviality, social justice, peace, dignity, free speech, to name a few. They remind us of the larger realms of geopolitics, hegemony, imperialism and power in the world. And even so, the precarious state of its interlocutors reveals to us the predicaments of neoliberalism and the need for an agonistic solidarity (Arendt, 1998). The latter may be an embodied subject position for the exiled artists, who are

constantly negotiating their exilic identities and political subject positions through their works of art or just in their daily life struggles. But in the end, it concerns all of us, including the very institutions and democracies who claim to be responsive.

FOOTNOTES

¹ This research shares some results of my Marie Skłodowska-Curie research project, “Exiled Lives on the Stage: Turkey’s Artists at the Crossroads of New Aesthetic Practices and Political Subjectivities” (Acronym ExiLives), based at the Freie Universität Berlin.

² Notable examples of exiles of Nazi Germany, who have contributed largely to the theorizing of exilic lives for political philosophy and cultural studies are Hannah Arendt, Bertolt Brecht, Theodor W. Adorno, Albert Camus, Jacques Derrida, Edward W. Said, to name but a few.

³ For a history of Turkish-language theatre in Germany, see chapter 3 in Boran (2023).

⁴ The podcast is available on Spotify, Deezer, Soundcloud, Amazon, Google and Apple Podcasts. See: <https://anchor.fm/pieter-verstraete>.

⁵ Watch the full performance here: <https://vimeo.com/207514587>.

⁶ On 29 May 2021, with translations by Hazni Demir, as part of a conference, “Re-Thinking the Post-Migrant Theatre: Possibilities for New Alternative Theater Movements”, organized by Hakan Altun and Antigone Akgün in collaboration with the theatre department of the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main.

⁷ See my policy report, “Exiled Lives on the Stage – Some Policy Recommendations regarding Support and Selfcare of Turkish Artists at Risk in Germany” (Sept. 2022), <https://www.academia.edu/87503635>.

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