

The Price of Water: Reflections on an Anthropological Play

 critical-stages.org/29/the-price-of-water-reflections-on-an-anthropological-play/

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June 10, 2024

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Abstract

Immigrants, refugees, hotspots, smugglers, police and border control—these are some of the recurrent concepts that fill government narratives, the media and news. These concepts are also filled with stereotypes that often mask the lived realities as well as the systemic conditions that lead to “invasions” and exploitation. Both anthropology and theatre offer powerful ways to challenge these and to share research with the public. This paper outlines the life of such a project by outlining the creative process of performing *The Price of Water*, a play based on ethnographic research with Syrian refugees in Greece during the so-called “refugee crisis” and the time of the implementation of the EU Hotspot approach to migration.

Keywords: refugees, Hotspot, anthropology, Brechtian humor, multimedia theatre

In memoriam Benjamin Zephaniah

The Price of Water—An Ethnographic Dialogue

The theatre has never been pure, medium-specific. . . . Theatre used painting, as it had used ritual, music, dance, writing, choreography, costume and set design. It had used machining, or dirty electronics, in the sense that theatre patches things together and always welcomes technologies of change.

Birringer, Kinetic Atmospheres 26

In his book *Kinetic Atmospheres: Performance and Immersion*, Johannes Birringer explores the “transformative power of theatre” beyond narratives of resilience or functions for “community,” through weather or unstable atmospheric conditions, as a living ecosystem (35). Employing such an extended aperture, disrespectful of purity or disciplinary confinement, anthropology and theatre do not seem unlikely fellows. Indeed, we could even modify the quote above, substituting “anthropology” where “theatre” is: anthropology also uses all forms and formats that societies produce to patch things together in a way that it produces insights and knowledge of the myriad ways of living and being. The joining of anthropology and theatre, then, is not new (Flynn and Tinius), and there was a tendency amongst theatre practitioners (Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and others), some decades

ago, to develop an approach to theatre anthropology which was concerned with intercultural research into sources of commonality, shared grounds in expressive behaviour across diverse performance cultures.



From left to right: Graeme Shaw, Hannah Knoerk, Michèle Danjoux, Johannes Birringer, Maria Kastrinou, Benjamin Zephaniah, Charlotte al-Khalili (on the computer screen). Artaud Performance Centre, 2023. Photo: Kastrinou, Knoerk, Birringer

What was new for us in 2022, however, was that we started from a very particular moment and a different source—emplaced with ethnographic interviews conducted at a particular moment in time, and we allowed the materiality of our connections and interactions to engineer and infuse an immersive atmosphere for a participatory re-performance. Ethnographic interviews and other materials were collected with Syrian refugees on the island of Lesbos during the so-called refugee “crisis” (2015 and after). Physical objects and textures, photographs, filmic material, music and sonic elements, alongside the primary bodily work, were then added during the rehearsal process and the scripting. “Scenographing an *atmosphere*,” Birringer (*Kinetic Atmospheres 4*) writes,

meant that the public would become immersed in it, move through it or be moved by it. Atmospheres in this sense are like the weather: they act, embrace us and slip into us or spread, move our sensations, vibrate in us, shape our presentiments. Except that in theatrical-architectural terms they are also engineered, constructed, actuated.

Here, we tell the story of how our collaboration came about and how we became immersed in constructing an exploratory and political performance.

The story begins with Maria Kastrinou working in Syria in 2008. Before the Syrian uprising and the proxy war that followed it, she lived in Damascus for almost two years where she carried out ethnographic fieldwork as part of her PhD project on the embodied politics of dance. When the devastating war in Syria happened, the research shifted to following Syrian refugees, now in her own country, Greece, specifically on the island of Lesbos (which was for most refugees their entrance point to Europe) and Athens (Kastrinou).

Yet, the experience of war and refuge was as traumatic as it was intense:

The war in Syria, as experienced by an anthropologist who was in a sense “reborn” through fieldwork only to witness the obliteration of her ethnographic field site; then the interviews with Syrian travelers who had escaped a brutal war and survived the dangerous boat journey across the Aegean and were literally *still wet* from the sea. Like a case of dissociative amnesia, much of this material from Greece was left untouched but not forgotten until 2022. Hannah Knoerk, who had been Kastrinou’s student and just graduated from Brunel’s anthropology programme, sorted through field documents and fixed translations, revisiting material that was not her own and thus exploring and rediscovering it—an echo through time and space, an ethnography of an ethnography. Together Maria and Hannah went on to write an academic paper “To the Future Guests of Lesbos: Hospitality Among Syrian Refugees in Greece.” But the ethnographic material still spoke, and it spoke in gripping tones different from what might be analytically described in a research article. These tones often sounded haunting, but also at times funny and absurd.

We brought the raw interviews, photos and sounds of recordings to Birringer, looking for his “engineering” approach: “understanding by building ropes and pulleys . . . asking how . . . digital performance art scaffolds its environment” (Birringer, *Kinetic Atmospheres* 36). Only this time it was water, clothes on ropes and fences that we needed scaffolding into the stage. We took our cues from the ethnographic material. Many of the words spoken on stage are from the interviews and ethnographic observations. The digital film/photo projections later added had to be developed from the physical gestures and dramaturgies first.

Starting from the material, we let the materiality of the ethnography guide us. The initial motifs capture the moment just before the instantiation of the E.U. “Hotspot Approach to migration” which institutionalized securitization, incarceration and policing as the main police response to migration (Neocleous and Kastrinou). This E.U.-wide policy was the result of the

E.U.-Turkey agreement that came into effect in March 2016, through which asylum seekers that arrived on the shores of Greece are placed in more or less closed prison-like structures called “Hotspots” in which they reside, in containers or tents, until their application is processed. Whereas prior to this treaty asylum seekers were, bar minimal registration, free to move and continue their journeys to the destinations they desired, the implementation of the Hotspot regime completely changed the terrain. Movement became first constrained and then impossible, whilst the living conditions of the people imprisoned in these structures became dire. Imprisoned, Syrian travelers lost hope and became more desperate. It is the frail transition into the Hotspot, its physical making, fence and tent-building along with the transformation of refugees’ own transition from hope to desperation that our play brings to the fore. The performance team had to look for tonalities and physical attitudes to embody the voices that had been collated from interviews and testimonies, as well as the ethnographic observations of the manifestations of the arrival of refugees who had stepped out of the water.

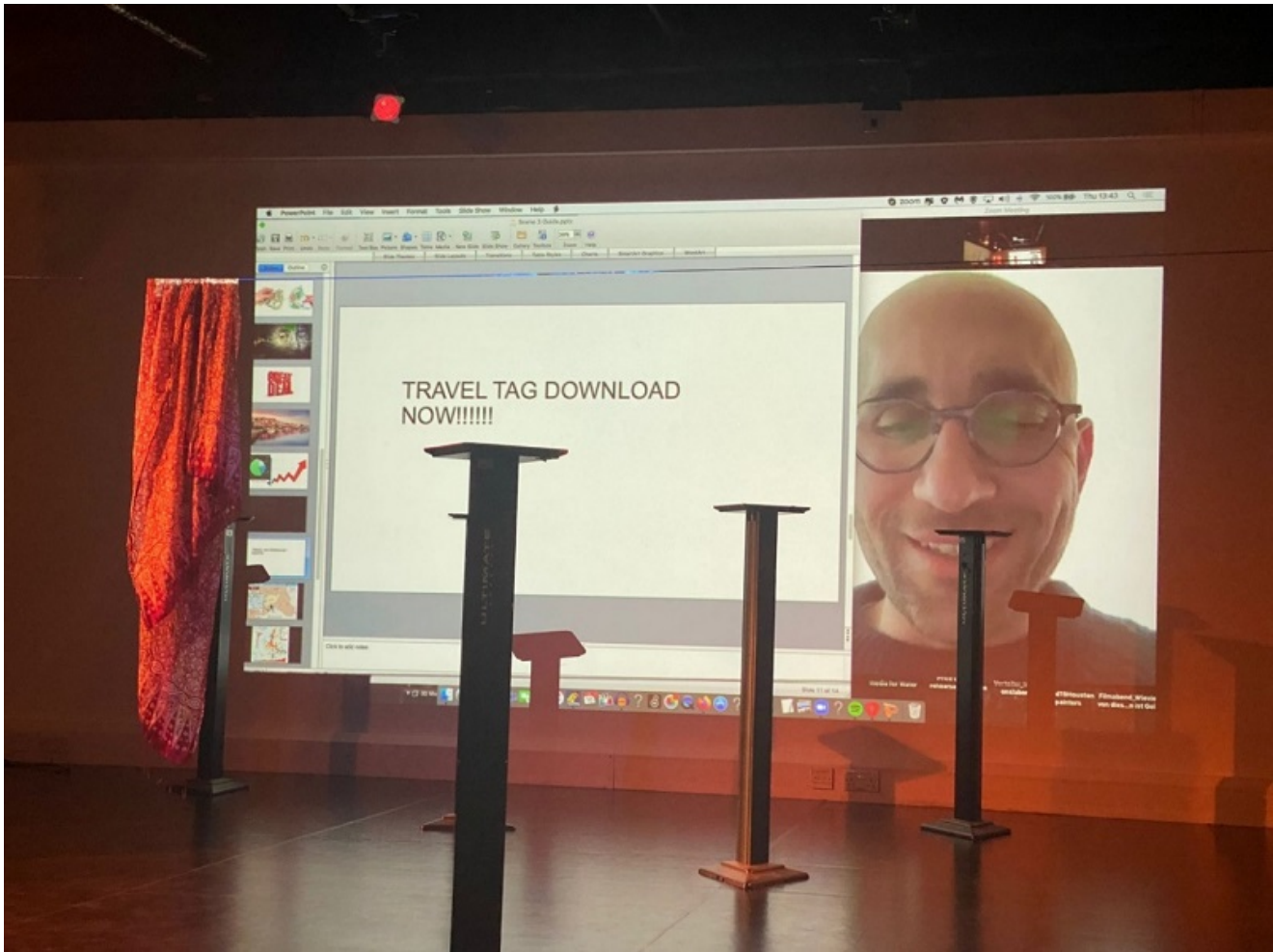
The inspiration behind the techniques and dramaturgy comes from Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre, and particularly his musical *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). We tried to re-imagine what the *Threepenny Opera* would be like if set in the Hotspot in Lesbos, and what our play’s character, the Guide, would have done as a contemporary reincarnation of Mack the Knife. Speaking across the time of economic depression and the rise of Nazism in Europe to our time of Hotspots and “hostile environment,” Brecht’s anti-capitalist themes reverberated through the ethnographic material as much as through the present political moment, and this was a recurrent motif in our conversations (cf. Brecht).

The Price of Water became a performative vessel for the ethnographically inscribed experiences of refugees having fled their war-torn country to seek what they imagine to be the “grace of safety”—a phrase we borrowed from one of the interviews with Syrian refugees—in Europe, set in the transitional space of the refugee registration centre. Although the research and guiding concepts for this work relies on fieldwork interviews, the intention was to speak *across time and situation*. The ability of the play to speak across situations was captured in one of our audience’s feedback:

I am “other” regardless of having been born, raised in the UK. I empathized and felt the exploitation, the degradation and helplessness of the refugees. I could not help (although arrival was safe and legal) but recall the fear and apprehension that my mother spoke of as they sailed aboard the Black Star shipping line in the late 1940s (early 50s) to Britain from newly independent Ghana.

Hence, our work soon became focused not on the plight of refugees but on the Hotspot, the fence, the capitalist exchange of give and take, and how the physical structure and the policing it entails make people behave in certain ways. We were not interested in moralising assumptions about good or bad people, deserving and undeserving refugees. Our purpose was precisely to critique the “enlightened” dichotomy of “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim”

(Mamdani), and by extension, “good refugee, bad refugee” (Cabot; Malkki), and to go beyond “giving a voice,” into questioning the humanitarian reason of ephemeral “moral” empathy (Fassin) by showing, as the Cultural Expert in our play sardonically notes, that “they are all in it together.”



Malek Rasamny in an online rehearsal via *Zoom*, using projection technologies in the Artaud Performance Centre studio, 2023. Photo: Kastrinou, Knoerk, Birringer

This is what we wanted to portray: there is no good or bad refugee. Their war is like their peace: a business—this materiality of business, of smuggling, pricing, policing and controlling brought Marx, Brecht and Syrian refugees on stage. When developing the characters in the play, we tuned into Brecht’s development of double-sided characters who are always both good and bad. In *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1943–45/1948), Azdak is a judge who drinks alcohol and makes decisions based on his feelings, not the law. Despite these qualities, he is the good judge who makes the right decisions. This mixing of qualities (and what he referred to as *gestus*) is typical of Brecht and is one of his didactic (illustrating a moral message) and dialectic (the audience is encouraged to observe objectively, ponder and develop critical detachment leading to social action) methods. When you put a price to something as basic and needed as water, and as safety, then nothing is left without a price. In *The Price of Water*, the character of the Guide, in this sense, is akin to Azdak and

Macheath, both good and bad; at the same time attractive, sleek, sleazy and potentially violent. Malek Rasamny, who is a Lebanese-American anthropologist and filmmaker, performed the role of the Guide with such conviction that his seemingly contradictory characteristics—and his confident playfulness with interchanging his American accent with his Arabic—moulded effortlessly into the business realities of the emerging prison/Hotspot.

Another aspect of Brecht's dialectic method is the *Verfremdungseffekt* (distancing or alienation effect), which allowed us to play with more critical ideas and not work with psychological emotion. The *Verfremdungseffekt* is a technique used in Brechtian theatre to prevent the audience from losing themselves in the narrative, instead creating distance in order for the audience to become conscious, critical observers. For example, the actor accomplishes this by directly addressing the audience, interrupting the narrative or drawing attention to the theatrical process (changing the set or costume on stage), using placards and written signage, as well as songs. In this way, we experimented with different sounds (hard rock, glimpses of Kurt Weill music, jazz improvisation, sound of waves, soundtracks of the interviews themselves and so on), and we dressed, undressed and changed the stage as part of the performance.

To further distance and interrogate the familiar sentimentality that might reside in media projections of “the plight of poor refugees,” humour and biting satire were used in the performance. Turning to political theatre, inspired by Brecht's use of irreverent humour, we were able to discover what comedy scholars know already, that humour is a serious business (Double and Lockyer). In the words of an audience member: “It was fast-paced, concise, but shocking. It reveals the situation, events and agents involved in an entertaining manner.”



Open sequence of video projections from the Hotspot on Lesbos, 2023. Photo: Kastrinou, Knoerk, Birringer

Our approach developed through a series of workshops where we began experimenting with scenography, the use of props and audiovisual media. We first worked quite literally with the verbatim interviews, using a rope as a line for hanging clothes cutting diagonally across the space. The atmosphere and the “scaffolding” were beginning to erupt: we used our bodies in space to move around, to inhabit, to dwell in another existence. We made drawings, and we walked in the forest to breathe the environment. We searched for water and started experimenting with digital video, audio interjections, lighting and sounds. To find out how a performative enactment might be possible, we read and sang Brecht’s political poetry and recited Nizzar Qabbani’s love poetry—although we could have done it the other way around too. The difference between expression in text and the range of physical possibilities of performance enactment started dawning on the anthropologists.

In January 2023, Kastrinou and Knoerk came together for a deeply engaging week-long script-writing workshop. This informal workshop was profoundly important for the progression of the script, as it was here that we solidified our political intention and direction for the play. It was after this time that Knoerk reimaged “The Ballad of Mac the Knife” and wrote a new *moritat* for our Guide. Retaining Kurt Weill’s music, the new *moritat* brings forth the main themes and ironies of the play, structurally dressing the main transitions between scenes. The seemingly simple and catchy melody had infected us, and Hannah Knoerk’s breathtaking performance on the night of the premiere was *Verfremdungseffekt* personified: a sarcastic Marlene Dietrich voice in a police costume.

Kastrinou completed the script during the following workshop in February 2023, and we held our first rehearsals together with performers Rhona Jack, a theatre student at Brunel, and filmmaker/actor Malek Rasamny, who joined us online. Also joining us in the Artaud theatre were our colleagues Benjamin Zephaniah (writer and performer of the video-poem *Money*), Michèle Danjoux (co-design) and Graeme Shaw (lighting and technical supervision). Benjamin Zephaniah's poem *Money* not only fitted brilliantly into the play's themes—and was placed near the end of the performance just before the “Auction House” Epilogue—but extended its political connections beyond the issue of migration and war, into racism, exploitation, consumerism. Money is governing *us* not just *them*, revealing a discomfoting similarity between the stage and the audience, that “paper giant called market forces”:

Children are dying
Spies are spying
Refugees are fleeing
Politicians are lying
And deals are done
And webs are spun

A Dub's anti-capitalist revenge, Zephaniah's poem breaks through to the last scene, our auction of misery in the Museum of Human Resilience, courtesy of the main roles: Culture Expert, the Police, the Guide and the Refugee. The Pianist introduces the rules of the auction bidding, and then all the actors join in, like a mad chorus or sellers, offering the objects that had been “collected” for the Museum of Human Resilience, each tiny object exhibited on a plinth and lit under a spotlight. The audience are hustled out of their money, even if many of them are too perplexed to join the bidding for a small empty plastic bottle or a wet shoe.



Hannah Knoerk in one of her roles, performing her rendition of “Mack the Knife,” with Johannes Birringer (not pictured, at the piano). Artaud Performance Centre, 2023. Photo: Kastrinou, Knoerk, Birringer

And while we were consolidating our political motifs, we were bodies in space, bodies that needed to learn to move through the scene, to work with and through textures. “What are you wearing?” asked Michèle Danjoux, a fashion designer renowned for her work with wearable textures and technologies in performing arts (Birringer and Danjoux). “A scarf can be used in myriad ways,” Danjoux said. Although the stage was full of wet and dried clothes, we had little time to think about how the textures of different fabrics affect our bodies, the stage and the atmosphere, how scarfs and veils can hide as much as they reveal. With Danjoux’s provocation, we started playing with fabrics, scarfs and textures, toys and objects. Together with Graeme Shaw’s insights into the sound and light of water, these conversations invigorated our curiosity to play with the fluidity, sound and colour of water. Essentially, this

led to the creation, by Danjoux and Birringer, of a soft but haunting presence of a tent, which, by March, had become one of the most characteristic aspects of the stage set and the logo of our Hotspot Collective.





Hannah Knoerk in Scene 2 starting to hang up wet clothes on the clothesline, in front of video projection, 2023. Photo: Kastrinou, Knoerk, Birringer

Regarding scarfs, appropriation and the ethics of doing anthropology, Charlotte Al-Khalili, an anthropologist working with Syrian refugees and revolutionaries in Turkey, offered us helpful insights from her own fieldwork. With the addition of actor Rasamny in person and Brunel student Sofya Zinovyeva for technical support, our final workshop took place in late March 2023, where the entire cast and crew came together for the dress rehearsal and performance night, integrating the conceptual and physical dimensions of *The Price of Water*. The play has a symmetrical structure (Prologue, Act I with three scenes, Act II with three scenes, Epilogue: Auction House) and is interspersed with the new songs that Knoerk wrote in the style of a Kurt Weill/Bertold Brecht's *moritat*. The Narrator introduces the scenario in her brief tour through the Museum of Human Resilience, welcoming the main characters of the play and with pregnant sarcasm preparing the audience for the "puzzle of survival," after they have already watched the intriguing prologue video of the E.U. foreign policy chief's speech, proclaiming that "Europe is a garden," praising its blooming "combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion." He then urges European leaders, whom he compares to "gardeners," to help prevent the invasion of the "jungle."

The crucial scene of the first Act is the interview the Museum curator/Culture Expert (performed by Jack with her evocative Scottish accent) conducts with the Woman (performed by Knoerk), who is trying to hang up all her wet clothes onto the clothesline stretched across the stage, and the Mother (Kastrinou), who emerges from the tent and is worried about her

sick child. In recurring scenes, one can observe the Guide (Rasamny), who throughout the play presents “toolkits” for the journey of the refugees, offering advice as a “fellow traveler, brother and refugee.” But then, he gradually morphs in each of his appearances from a “genuine” (fake) fellow traveler into an exploitative entrepreneur abusing his power and also negotiating with the Police (Knoerk), and doing business with the Mother in the tent, bartering with her about the price of asylum. The plot grows sinister, and in Act II the play develops its ferocious critique of the Hotspot economy and the E.U. and local Greek/European management of the affairs of “Hotspot” holding camps, where the arriving migrants, expecting hospitality, receive a bureaucratic and exploitative nightmare, as if they had unexpectedly landed in Kafka’s *Castle*, or more poignantly even, at the gate in “Before the Law”—where the gatekeeper asks the visitor to wait a bit, telling them that they cannot enter now but maybe in the future.



Rhona Jack as Culture Expert interviews Woman and Mother, 2023. Photo: Kastrinou, Knoerk, Birringer

After months of preparation off-stage and time-constrained intense rehearsals, during which Birringer had to complete all the visual projections and sonic elements for the production, the premiere was finally staged in front of a packed house, followed by a fruitful post-performance discussion.

At the start of this section, we posed the question how theatre and anthropology can share conceptual and physical approaches for collaborative performance. What was challenging for us in this coming together of theatre and anthropology was the idea articulated by the Guide in our play: “Boats are not necessarily as dangerous as we hear about them, the real danger is that we have not been in one before.”

Performing Anthropology in the Theatre

One of the creative tensions that we had to navigate was how to be “truthful” to the ethnographic material whilst creating compelling immersive performative aesthetics that engage or reveal a politicized subject with complex economic, legal, geopolitical, ethical and humanitarian dimensions. This was also recognised by observers in the post-performance discussion; namely, the tension between distance and responsibility (to interlocutors). One audience member praised the play and the team’s courage to move between disciplines: “I think this tension is really fruitful, and it’s not an easy place to be in.” He added that it is a space to look at materials through a different lens, to translate materials and data that anthropologists collect. Furthermore, he suggested that the process could help us explore places and relations between anthropologists and artists, and how they relate to issues differently. For the anthropologist, the material was tied to the people that she knew. Here was the challenge: connecting the specifics of the real persons that she knew with Brechtian epic theatre of distance in order to embody the role and engage the audience into a critical dialogue.



Malek Rasamny as Guide explains business transactions during refugee crisis, 2023. Photo: Kastrinou, Knoerk, Birringer

For example, when asked in the discussion how the roles were cast and what this process was like, Kastrinou replied that casting was particularly difficult for her, since the roles of Woman and Mother were both extended from actual interviews and very specific people she had gotten to know. Hence, it was challenging to play these roles because she felt a sense of responsibility, and, at the same time, Brechtian theatre dramaturgy gave her the freedom to show the politics outside and beyond what forms people and the transactions displayed in

the Hotspot; for example, also the sexual dependencies or transactions. This tension—between being responsible for the people and the material, not trivialising what refugees have been through, but also striking a point of distance as in Brechtian theatre—was indeed fruitful, as we were able to talk about the *structure* of the hotspot that makes people behave in the way that they do.

One theatre student in the audience posed poignant questions about the problem of representation, which is closely related to the responsibility towards interlocutors mentioned above. Brechtian theatre is about distancing, he said, but if these are real people, there might be a disconnection by creating these archetypes or the *gestus* in which a role is presented. He asked our team if they had experimented with named characters and greater focus on the specific stories of specific people. Take the mother figure for example: if the informant were to watch the theatre performance, what would she think if she saw that her story had been reduced to “just a mother”?

With provocations like these, a Pandora’s box is opened, and many questions emerge that are worth thinking about: What would our interlocutors think of this? Is this a one-sided collaboration between anthropologists and artists? What would this piece look like if performed by Syrian refugees, what kind of problems or challenges would that offer? Performance artists such as Santiago Sierra, Tania Bruguera and Tino Sehgal have worked in this manner, not casting actors for their “situations” (Sehgal) or performance installations but employing real workers, say, or policemen, homeless people or immigrants, thus also drawing attention to economic transactions in representation and to the idea of “delegating” performance, as Claire Bishop describes it succinctly in her book *Artificial Hells*—for example, in her chapters on happenings, “social sadism” and “delegated performance.”

There have also been a few plays, including Claire Bayley’s *The Container* (performed at the Young Vic in 2009) or Joe Murphy/Joe Robertson’s more recent *The Jungle* (2018), which have dealt head-on with the plight of migrants and refugees, with the drama of movement of bodies across borders, the ethical transgressions, primary stakes as well as impasses that emerge when theatre attempts to present or represent the refugee. In many instances, British or continental theatre, from community drama workshops to fringe festivals, often uses a pedagogical, well-meaning effort to sway public opinion towards welcoming refugees or migrants. Less often, but most notably in the notorious stage/film productions by Milo Rau (for example, *Congo Tribunal*, 2017; *The New Gospel*, 2020; *Antigone in the Amazon*, 2023), innovative techniques have begun characterizing an unclear new genre that hovers between agitprop art, documentary cinema, social sculpture and meta-theatre, borrowing from immersive and participatory practices to multilingual scripts or the verbatim use of legal transcripts.

We were aware of the paradoxes and of performance art’s transgressive capacity to stage its own contradictions within a global capitalist economic system without any functioning global civil society or global legislation, without spaces where refugees were able to engage as

moral agents (as Milo Rau's projects suggest) outside of xenophobic, racialised narratives. While the intention of *The Price of Water* was to speak across time and place, some kinds of specificity cannot be ignored. As Birringer suggested in the post-performance discussion, Mexican refugees are dying of thirst and heat at the desert border of Texas, rather than drowning in the Aegean. To speak of traumatising realities and their specificity, we must be mindful of the kind of "fabulous work" that goes into producing and reproducing narratives, as it is the same work that goes into the physical and emotional pain inflicted on the bodies of those that experience torture or traumatic events (Taussig). While it is important to put this issue into broader context and examine discursive frameworks or master narratives/Western epistemologies, we must be careful not to distance ourselves too far from the narratives and narrative modes of those who experience war and other forms of violence. The purpose of these questions is not to be answered, but rather they emerged in the interdisciplinary process and illustrate how anthropology and theatre can transform anthropological understanding of subjectivity, agency and, therefore, reflexivity, creating a way of working that allows attention to different ways of knowing (Gatt).



Police Woman and Guide negotiate business schemes, 2023. Photo: Kastrinou, Knoerk, Birringer

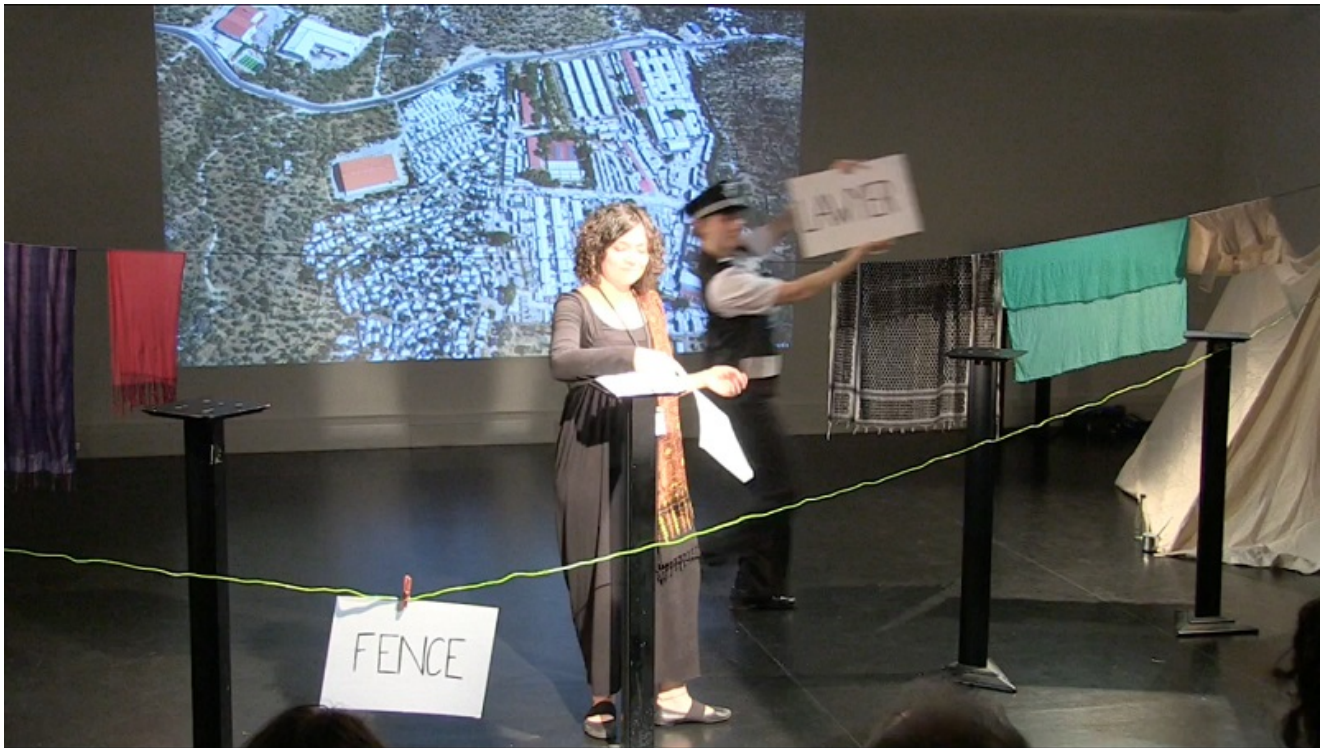
Anthropology and Theatre

In the post-performance discussion an audience member asked, "What does an anthropologist do exactly? What is the purpose, is it just to know or share among academics only?" Kastrinou replied,

Anthropology at its best, similar to theatre, is to make you walk in the shoes of someone else. To be interested in why people do the things they do, say the things they do—and not do the things they say. All of art tries to transport you into the bodies, into the shoes of other people.

Gatt opens her chapter with a similar question: “What do anthropologists make? . . . the form that anthropological knowledge takes for the purpose of evaluation remains firmly rooted in text: dissertations, books, articles. Even conference presentations are mostly ‘read,’ rather than performed” (334). Gatt then considers the value of engaging with experimental theatre and how performance practice can inform anthropological projects from research design to methods, through to presentation. First, she suggests performative anthropology provides pathways to subaltern knowledge; that is, different ways of working that do not reproduce hegemonic knowledge practices.

Working together on *The Price of Water*, we experienced first-hand how these practices are firmly embedded in anthropological knowledge and had to be dismantled in the co-creation process. For Kastrinou and Knoerk, Birringer was an essential instigator who encouraged us to let go rather than focus on text, extending our awareness to the body, our voice, our breath, movement, time, ability or disability. We had to leave our comfort zone, our learned patterns of knowing—namely, (ethnographic) text—and deal with embodied work, movement, silence and spatial relationships in a black box, where specific materials and props were built to be used and performed. Indeed, Birringer kept urging the actors to limit words (text) and rely more on movement and gesture, to allow the audience to imagine what goes on inside a person who was shipwrecked or who lost everything, whose child is sick, who has not eaten properly for days. The use of video, photographic stills and soundtracks also needed to be taken into account, since performance art is inherently multimodal and multisensory, and some of these media have different rhythms or even create contrasting sensory affects.



Maria Kastrinou (centre) in Scene 7, announcing changes in Hotspot regulations. Hannah Knoerk crosses the stage behind her, 2023. Photo: Kastrinou, Knoerk, Birringer

Secondly, Gatt argues that performative ethnography can contribute to anthropological understanding of reflexivity and collaboration. For experimental theatre makers such as Birringer, dimensions of reflexivity are central to their practice. These forms of reflexivity are often overlooked or dismissed due to hegemonic conceptions of “knowledge.” Interdisciplinary work with theatre makers and choreographers can offer new methods by which to explore other forms of sensorial, kinaesthetic and somatic reflexivity that are very different from the reflexive attention anthropologists develop: self-scrutiny, constantly questioning their own assumptions and values. It is no wonder that “talking about the body” and the so-called paradigm of embodiment have only reproduced the division between mind and body. If the discipline is fundamentally based on the premise that academic knowledge is distinct from other forms of knowledge that are considered practical, how should anthropology ever overcome the mind/body dichotomy? Learning to practice different forms of reflexivity—and not just writing about them—offers a potential methodological tool to transcend Cartesian assumptions still implicit in anthropological practice that privileges all things associated with the mind (Gatt 342–43).

Consider once more the following quote from an audience member:

It was a very moving piece. The visual of the clothing line was very effective. The tedious squeezing of the water to me felt it represented the long journey the refugees go on. To survive the water and to almost be left hanging—the phrase hung out to dry.

This observer is specific about the tedious squeezing of the water, a repetitive movement which is insistently present in most of the scene enacted by Knoerk. But the audience does not require convincing in the same way a reader of an academic paper would, and while the connections she made may not have been intentional, they are entirely correct. Performance practice not only left the anthropologist with more freedom to express herself politically, but the audience also has more freedom to draw their own parallels.

With these considerations in mind, how does incorporating theatre fit into existing research practices and when would it be best suited? One audience member questioned whether this type of presentation would be better served *earlier* in the research process. In her opinion, the story told had already become “part of history,” and she wondered whether introducing this kind of project earlier in the research process could be useful to alert people about the issues we come across as researchers. Since it can take years to publish research findings, this kind of project could be a helpful way to highlight issues and bring attention to stories.

With regard to the time question as well, Malek Rasamny used the example of his own interdisciplinary work, the multimedia project *The Native and the Refugee* and the feature film, *Spaces of Exception* (2019), an excerpt of which could be briefly glimpsed in our performance. By using shorter “on the road” films as they accumulated footage for the longer feature film, they were able to return to different locations and give people something in return, rather than just taking. While the short films were made in a rapid time frame, the feature took four years to complete in the editing. Showing these shorter films on location allowed them to receive commentary and feedback, opening new paths with people on the ground, which was integral to the process of creating the “final product.”

Finally, Gatt argues that experimentation with performance practice has the potential to change the temporal orientation inherent in the practice of ethnography. What *could* anthropologists make if we acknowledge what theatre makers have long understood: namely, that performance (or fieldwork for that matter) is part of the constitution of reality, of *being alive* (as Tim Ingold calls it), a constant, dynamic, fluent creation, not simply an expression or re-presentation of it (Ingold 60; Gatt 346). The consequence of opening up space for interrupting the certainty of knowledge shifts anthropological knowledge artefacts from being closed, complete and documentary to becoming processual, prospective and *provocateur* (Gatt 350).



Refugee items are sold at auction after Benjamin Zephaniah's "Money Song," 2023. Photo: Kastrinou, Knoerk, Birringer

Future Routes

Working on *The Price of Water* has been a fruitful and revealing adventure involving a lot of labour, love and immersive learning. The ethnography spoke across the different academic, personal and artistic stages as we laboured to transport it in keeping the anthropological specificity and responsibility whilst bringing forth the political and legal dislocations of the Hotspot, the experience of border police and the marketisation of ethnic identities that border regimes create. Here, epic theatre allowed us to think through anthropological theory, specificity and categorisation. Theatre, and the performativity of the materials we had to work with and inhabit, often pushed us outside of our comfort zones. There, on stage, a collective energy and an electric atmosphere emerged, gripping us at once back to the past (ethnographic fieldwork is always past even if it is often presented in the present tense), scaffolding us onto the present, as well as pointing to ongoing and future political quarrels about immigration and border policing in Europe. The atmosphere obviously spoke to us, performers, and our audience, whom we also considered participants when we invited them into the auctioning off of some of the "personal possessions" rescued by the refugees who came across the water. But, as Birringer writes: "atmospheres are tricky, they are tricksters, technical actors, they are actionable and they are performed" (*Kinetic Atmospheres* 4).

How can atmospheres be tricksters? Could the atmosphere of the performance, the energy and materiality of characters and props, overshadow its political or ethnographic goals? What if these goals are "tricksters," too? To delve deeper into such politics and ethics, we

need to take anthropology on stage, as much as to use theatre as a space of collaboration and of anthropological research. One of our future routes, then, is to perform *The Price of Water* to different audiences. A performance near the now burned-down Hotspot in Lesvos, Greece, or a workshop with stateless Syrians in the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights. How could our performance change in site-specific contexts? What connections and disruptions would we find between regimes of humanitarianism and those of occupation? More precisely, how could we change the prison and the museum to include the anthropology of people on the margins of war and occupation?



The late Benjamin Zephaniah during “Money Song,” 2023. Photo: Kastrinou, Knoerk, Birringer

Since the start of Israel’s war on Palestinians, the future of this project itself is questionable, as academic freedoms and cultural rights are under attack at a time when both collaborations within the Middle East and the power of art are most needed. In concluding, we note that more than 33,000 Palestinian lives, many of these children, have been murdered in Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian Territories to date, a genocide dripping in blood. Art and cultural rights in Palestine are also under attack: the murder of Palestinian poet [Refaat Alareer](#), the attacks, murders and arrest of members of the [Freedom Theatre](#), a [metal horse monument](#) in Jenin Refugee camp. In despair, it is easy to ask what is the use of theatre, anthropological or not, at such dark times. Is a play enough, how can it withstand border police, tanks and missiles? But the fact that art and artists are under attack is in itself a testament to their power and regenerative magic, a field in which anthropology, like a trickster, can engage, translate, and articulate our common struggles and imaginations for life free of occupation, war, and borders

Note: *The Price of Water—An Immersive Ethnographic Collaborative Dialogue*, is a project funded by the Institute of Communities and Society, at Brunel University London. The team is Maria Kastrinou (Lecturer in Anthropology at Brunel University, PI), Johannes Birringer (Honorary Professor at Brunel University, Co-I) and Hannah Knoerk (Research Fellow and alumna Brunel Anthropology student).

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Critical Stages/Scènes critiques e-ISSN:2409-7411



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