

## **Schwerpunkt | Body as Border. Political Affiliations of Undocumented Migrants on Stage**

Lara Marie Gilia Busse

### **Abstract**

At a time when the borders of individual EU states, and beyond, are closed due to the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic, the question of undocumented migrants' political affiliation takes on new urgency, particularly with regard to Moria and other refugee camps on the external borders of the EU. It is clear that in Germany especially, but also in other affected countries, the question of who may and who may not cross a border is not necessarily being decided on the basis of humanitarian claims or existing asylum law categories, but on the basis of political and socio-economical necessities.

At a time when the borders of individual EU states, and beyond, are closed due to the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic, the question of undocumented migrants' political affiliation takes on new urgency, particularly with regard to Moria and other refugee camps on the external borders of the EU. It is clear that in Germany especially, but also in other affected countries, the question of who may and who may not cross a border is not necessarily being decided on the basis of humanitarian claims or existing asylum law categories, but on the basis of political and socio-economical necessities.

The debate terms such as *refugee crisis* or *wave of refugees* has shaped the (political) discourse since 2015 at the earliest and the question of how to address this massive shift on a worldwide scale or in Europe has been raised again and again. However, one thing is certain: "There are almost 20 million refugees, asylum seekers, and

internally displaced persons' in the world"<sup>1</sup> who are mostly on the run or living in camps, mainly under inhuman conditions, lacking access to basic food, water or medical care.

Although recent border closures, including those inside the EU, show that neither the nation-state nor its physical borders belong to the past, borders are no longer exclusively bound to the nation-state and the sovereignty associated with it. For the citizens of Europe, borders have become virtually invisible in recent decades, mainly since the Schengen-Agreement(s) of 1985, 1990 and 1999. Yet, the crossing of borders by undocumented migrants is subject to strict regulations that do not necessarily reflect this legal modification of borders.<sup>2</sup>

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes a limited right of freedom of movement across boundaries: it recognizes the right to emigrate – that is, the right to leave a country – but not a right to immigrate – the right to enter a country.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that we have also enshrined the right to asylum in the Declaration of Human Rights (Article 14 and 15); it is an ancient right that – somewhat conflated with the costume of hikesia – had already been brought to trial in Aeschylus's *The Suppliants*. However, this right is also bound to the (local) conditions of the respective nation-state.

As a result,

The Universal Declaration is silent on states' obligations to grant entry to immigrants, to uphold the right of asylum, and to permit citizenship to alien residents and denizens. These rights have no specific addressees and do not appear to anchor specific obligations of compliance on the part of second and third parties. Despite the cross-border character of these rights, the Declaration upholds the sovereignty of individual states.<sup>4</sup>

This situation leads to a constant renegotiation of undocumented migrants' respective rights and political affiliations, a process during which they find themselves in a permanent state of limbo: on the threshold between legality and illegality.

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<sup>1</sup> Benhabib, Seyla: „Borders, Boundaries, and Citizenship“, in: *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Oct., 2005), pp. 673-677, here p. 673.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Balibar, Etienne: „Europe as Borderland“, [gpm.ruhosting.nl/avh/Europe %20as %20Borderland.pdf](http://gpm.ruhosting.nl/avh/Europe%20as%20Borderland.pdf) (Accessed 28.02.2020), p. 5 f.

<sup>3</sup> Benhabib: „Borders, Boundaries, and Citizenship“, p. 674.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Jean-Luc Nancy explores this threshold in his book *The Intruder*, describing the intrusion of the foreign as a spatial phenomenon, a moment of transition from one state to another. According to this assumption, this threshold is a place that one occupies only temporarily – a place of passage. The temporal limitation of transition is prolonged by the unresolved legal status of undocumented migrants. The threshold transforms into a temporarily unlimited space of in-between.<sup>5</sup>

Using Hannah Arendt's description of the *stateless* in the 20th century from her book *Origins of Totalitarianism* as an argumentative starting point, this text will examine the connection between the body and the border in the 21st century.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, referencing the theory of Julia Wessel, which understands contemporary borders as representative of personalised places of permanence, I will show the extent to which the political affiliation of undocumented migrants in Europe is curtailed.<sup>7</sup> Finally, I will use a current theatrical example to illustrate how undocumented migrants are represented on stage and how the permanent state of the in-between can be negotiated in theatre.

## **The Appearance of Borders**

When speaking about the function of borders one thinks of a specific line on a map or of a certain place that symbolizes separation: a constitution of insides and outsides, citizens and strangers, the legal and illegal. Borders show a clear and stable separation of territories and legal communities. However, coupled with advancing globalisation, these territorial allocations are losing their clarity. When becoming almost invisible for one person, borders are almost connected to the appearance of the body for another in return.

In Hannah Arendt's work we encounter an understanding of nation-state borders that ultimately lead to vast numbers of minorities being excluded from their respective states at the beginning of the 20th century, and thus, falling innocently into a status of

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<sup>5</sup> See: Nancy, Jean-Luc: *Der Eindringling. Das Fremde Herz*. Berlin 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Arendt, Hannah: „Statelessness“ (1955), [www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/155/275](http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/155/275) (Accessed 28.02.2020).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Schulze Wessel, Julia: *Zur politischen Theorie des Flüchtlings*. Bielefeld 2017, p. 125.

statelessness. Trapped in this state, they could no longer access their rights and lost their political affiliation. This resulted in a total exclusion of minorities from the national legal systems that persecuted them and from the international legal communities that might have saved them from the horrors of extermination camps like Auschwitz. The Jews could not rely on any nation-state to guarantee their supposed fundamental human rights.<sup>8</sup>

Seventy-five years later, borders are less easy to define. In particular, European borders are constituted through various forms of control aimed at migrants whose legal and political affiliation itself is already ambiguous, whereas European citizens experience the EU as a global transitory space with complete freedom of movement: they are no longer necessarily territorial, they are no longer a fixed line on a map. If borders remain invisible to EU citizens, they become visible in diverse forms to undocumented migrants. They can appear as border posts, a fence, or a wall. They can also appear in the form of entities of control, such as *Frontex* or the coastguard of a particular country, for example Libya. Consequently, borders are created where controlling bodies meet undocumented migrants. This creates a dependent, dynamic interaction between the appearance of undocumented migrants and authoritative organs of the state. Borders become fluid and can no longer be clearly located.<sup>9</sup>

It is this dichotomy that defines today's borders: selective appearances through seemingly invisible means of control. Thus, borders are becoming mobile. In fact, they only ever manifest during the encounter between the undocumented migrant and mobile means of control: borders are no longer bound to places, but to persons and their bodies.

Julia Schulze-Wessel, a scholar of political theory, has studied the figure of undocumented migrants and defined them as constitutive and active figures of the border. If one examines borders as instances that appear in connection to undocumented migrants and, simultaneously, consider them to be always in motion,

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Arendt, Hannah: *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft. Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, totale Herrschaft*. Berlin 2017, p. 601 f.

<sup>9</sup> Balibar, Etienne: *Der Schauplatz der Anderen. Formen der Gewalt und Grenzen der Zivilität*. Hamburg 2006, p. 248.

they manifest as a form of caesura or interruption, as an instance of control and appearance. If migrants do not possess documents giving them an entry route, they develop routes which can often be very dangerous and which, in a best-case scenario, avoid all control authorities. They might form networks (potentially through social media) in which they organise themselves and pass on routes. Concurrently, complete protection or closure of a border is impossible. Also, completely closing a border does not reduce the number of people who want to enter the EU, it only influences their tactics and routes.

Undocumented migrants therefore violate borders not only by trying to cross them, but also by constantly shifting their routes, thus *helping* to reshape borders. As a result, previously invisible national borders or places that have never been considered borders before, such as the Mediterranean Sea, are evolving into highly secured border areas through the increased use as routes by undocumented migrants.<sup>10</sup>

Schulze-Wessel also decisively shows that undocumented migrants are also *inhabitants* of borders. If the border is understood to be constituted by the appearance of certain persons, a penetration of this border is no longer possible, it no longer refers to an unambiguous interior and exterior. Instead, a space in between is opened, the border space, which, through the interaction between bodies of control and migrant, becomes a space capable of negotiating political affiliation and is specifically assigned to the undocumented migrant.<sup>11</sup>

The resulting border area is not to be understood as a homogeneous space, but rather as one of confrontation and conflict between the desire to migrate further to reach a destination country and the sovereign right to block access to national territory. Accordingly, the border area is a heterogeneous space of conflict between different actors.<sup>12</sup> This observation leads to the assumption that both systems of border control and undocumented migrants are given an active position within the border area.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Schulze Wessel: *Zur politischen Theorie des Flüchtlings*, p. 105 f.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 119 f.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

This state of negotiation or suspension of negotiation represents what Schulze-Wessel calls *the permanence of the border*.<sup>13</sup> The border is a constant companion of undocumented migrants because they are themselves actors of border creation.<sup>14</sup>

Undocumented migrants who are coming to Europe today differ from Arendt's *stateless* in various ways, especially in that they are no longer inevitably minorities outside a system of *textbook* nation-states, but rather citizens of countries who have made the decision to leave due to war, political violence, persecution, or simply inhuman conditions. They are not necessarily excluded but denied political affiliation, captured in a permanent status of in-betweenness in which they depend on the largesse of European migration policies, otherwise doomed to remain forever in transit.

A vivid recent example are the lifeboats carrying undocumented migrants rescued from drowning in the Mediterranean that were not allowed to enter European ports. This in-between status manifests in many ways, but (the) deportation to (refugee) camps as Arendt describes it can still be considered the final consequence today, even if the goals of an extermination camp do not apply to the present conditions. These camps, such as those in Libya, serve as a mobile interim solution, again, of permanence brought to an intrinsically non-permanent transit.

Another point that needs to be mentioned here is the inherent timelessness within the border area. The journey of an undocumented migrant to their destination if they ever arrive, may take weeks, months, or even years. Usually prolonged stays in refugee camps are often extended indefinitely, to the point that today we can find camps where the houses are built of stone.

Furthermore, the border region can also be experienced within a nation-state. It is bound to a person, and especially to a person's racialised body, which is why it exists as long as the political affiliation of the respective person has not been clarified. This affects the status of residence of a migrant, their work permit, their apartment, their

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>14</sup> *Cf. ibid.*, p. 125 f.

hope of being able to bring their family to their new home. It is simply not possible to build an existence in a new country within this unresolved status of the border area. The threat of deportation or rejection determines the everyday life of everyone afflicted:

The condition of undocumented aliens as well as of refugees and asylum seekers, however, remains in that murky domain between legality and illegality. [...] Undocumented migrants [...] are cut off from rights and benefits and mostly live and work in clandestine ways.<sup>15</sup>

However, questions remain: what consequences can be drawn from the migrant's condition? What does a permanent stay in the border region mean for an individual's political affiliation? According to Seyla Benhabib, political affiliation mirrors the possibilities of free entry and exit, social access, and the possibility of having a voice. This form of belonging represents a human right from which no one should be permanently excluded by any political community. As a result, according to Benhabib, the borders of a nation-state no longer represent an adequate basis for belonging today.<sup>16</sup>

### **Political Affiliation on Stage – *All Inclusive* by Julian Hetzel**

It would be interesting to examine to what extent the shift in the perspective of the border from *national* to *personal* is mediated by the representation of undocumented migrants on stage. How are migrant bodies negotiated in performance?

Theatre as a public space is linked thematically to a long tradition of flight and migration. Still today, it is difficult to find large city theatres or smaller, local institutions that do not address these themes in their productions. Since at least 2015, the number of productions with or about refugees or undocumented migrants has risen significantly.<sup>17</sup> Yet, even in ancient times, the themes of flight, arrival and appearance were a constitutive element of theatre-in-society. What mechanisms and structures of the stage allow for the presentation and narration of flight and migration? The theatre – and with it the stage – is a changeable space that offers a place to enter, to stay,

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<sup>15</sup> Benhabib: "Borders, Boundaries, and Citizenship", p. 675.

<sup>16</sup> Benhabib, Seyla: *The Rights of Others. Aliens, Residents, and Citizens*. Cambridge 2004, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Etzold, Jörn: „Flucht“, in: Gustav Mecklenburg/Nora Sdun (Ed.): *Kleiner Stimmungs-Atlas in Einzelbänden (Bd. 20)*, Hamburg 2018, p. 12.

and to leave again.<sup>18</sup> Conflicts and relations between people are constantly negotiated. Particularly concerning the topic of flight and migration, it is no longer only a question of purely artistic presentation on stage, but also one of negotiating the corresponding political context. Putting these theoretical concerns into more concrete terms, one recent example stands out: *All Inclusive*, directed by Julian Hetzel.<sup>19</sup>

The main concept of *All Inclusive* is aimed at displaying the hypothesis that suffering can be turned into art and art can be turned into money, a supposedly satirical approach to the dominant art market. But what is the audience confronted with on stage? The entire production takes place inside a white cube, an exhibition space in which new exhibition objects and live performances are presented from scene to scene, all of which exhibit a form of aestheticised violence. The exhibition is guided by a curator who accompanies a group of visitors, with the performance ensemble consisting of amateur actors from different migration backgrounds. On display, one encounters realistic depictions of violence alongside abstractions, objects that become art only through the violent acts of the visitors (e.g. smashing of porcelain dogs), as well as remnants of lived-in violence (e.g. rubble from Syrian ruins that has been assembled into bombs). Thus, *All Inclusive's* idea is to confront people who may have lived through the violence of war with aestheticised forms of violence further transformed into capital by the Western art market.

While attempting to criticise the prevailing art market, which capitalises on war and the suffering of others, Julian Hetzel places (ostensible) refugees on stage. It is precisely this confrontation between the migrants and the aestheticisation of violence that the performance wanted to mock. However, in doing so, it created a discrepancy between reflecting on a seemingly cynical art market and its own unquestioned mode(s) of representation. The scene mentioned above functions as a particularly striking example as it broaches the issue of art that recreated bombs from the original ruins of a Syrian city. The curator, presenting this aesthetic aspect, asks the fugitives for their opinion. But instead of hearing them out, she continues her monologue, and thus, everything that is mentioned becomes obsolete. They were not given a voice on stage.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Etzold: „Flucht“, p. 13 f.

<sup>19</sup> *All Inclusive*, Regie: Julian Hetzel, Premiere 20. April. 2018, Amsterdam.



Not even their names were remembered by the curator, evoking the idea of them as '(in)-human material' on stage. They are props used to reinforce apparent criticisms and cynicisms. Unfortunately, there was no meta-level reflection to be found as the ostensible reactions of the undocumented migrant – scenes like these are not isolated cases in *All Inclusive* – became irrelevant to the plot of the play. To state it clearly, they represent the status of the undocumented migrant itself and were instrumentalised human material used only for the purpose of confrontation with aestheticised violence. However, the discourse itself that is opened remains in abeyance by this form of representation because the dramatic emphasis lies upon the presentation of the refugees and does not reflect on the eligible criticisms concerning the Western art market.

## Conclusion

The danger inherent in narratives such as those displayed by Julian Hetzel in *All Inclusive* lies in the retelling of a status quo that easily results in an unreflective, cynical processing of exhibition and subsequent heroising.<sup>20</sup> Or, undocumented migrants display the status of their flight only. If, as proposed here, the body is understood as the limit of political affiliation, the necessity of using these figures to negotiate the emerging aporia of lawlessness and exclusion from political affiliation on stage becomes clear. The border region demonstrates that the potential of political representation is impossible, or at least very fragile. But if we understand theatre as such an in-between space itself, and if we negotiate the border space through means of theatre, a necessary level of reflection could emerge. A reflection that not only dedicates itself to the status quo of the depicted figure but contextualises and negotiates this in regard to the question of how such a political, legal, and ultimately social issue could, and should, be dealt with macroscopically. In Hetzel's case, this meta-level was missing. The actors remained one-dimensionally trapped in the personage of an archetypal *refugee* arbitrarily placed on stage, who was not questioned, but exhibited. In this context, the aspiration of theatre can, and must, be reformulated: the representation of compassion, the heroisation of individuals, and

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<sup>20</sup> What is meant here is the highlighting of individual (heroic) fates, which represent a thoroughly one-sided narrative of the undocumented migrant on stage.

cynical exhibition could give way to a theatrical discourse that brings attention to those aporias of rights and belonging while simultaneously negotiating them on stage. The result would provide a theatrical space of representation for border spaces, this persevering in a permanent, uncertain in-between. The stage could become a place that invites a discourse with the perspectives of people who must actually experience border spaces and where those who want to represent it on stage can be heard. Their representations, their stories, must be given the opportunity to leave the space of the border, which is not accessible to the general public, in order to bright forth and open a new kind of discourse.

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