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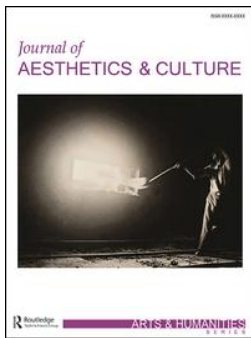
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Postmigrant theatre: the Ballhaus Naunynstraße takes on sexual nationalism

Lizzie Stewart 

Department of German, King's College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Theatre is seldom considered a major social or theoretical mover today; however, since its inauguration in 2008, the Ballhaus Naunynstraße theatre in Kreuzberg, Berlin, has been hugely instrumental in bringing the concept of postmigration into the public realm in Germany and beyond. Shermin Langhoff, the founding artistic director of the Ballhaus, explains that “postmigrant means that we critically question the production and reception of stories about migration and about migrants which have been available up to now and that we view and produce these stories anew, inviting a new reception”. As scholars such as Yasemin Yildiz highlight, one dominant “story” produced about migrants in recent years has involved a shift in means of othering from the ethnonational to religious, making for example, “Allah’s daughters” out of “Turkish girls”. Changing the subject in this way, has also allowed a discourse to emerge which positions Muslim migrants as a threat to “European” sexual and gender rights; a discourse also considered under the heading “sexual nationalism”. In this article I explore the narratives and gestures through which the theoretically aware postmigrant theatre as practised at the Ballhaus “views and invites a new reception of” this particular development. I suggest that not only does a broad view of the theatre’s repertoire over its first decade reveal a long-standing concern with and intervention into the intersection of discourses on sexuality, gender, and migration, but also that repeated scenarios of both stripping as punishment and more playful striptease emerge as a dominant gesture or even *gestus* in the theatre’s repertoire, even when sexuality or gender may not be central themes. Where might a gestic analytic, and a focus on viewing the theatre’s practices as active generator, rather than object, of theory, take academic engagements with sexual nationalism and postmigration?

KEYWORDS

Gestus; political theatre; Nurkan Erpulat; striptease; racialised sexualities; *Verrücktes Blut*; *Lö Bal* *Almanya*; *Jenseits*



Always this number with the headscarf, sexual emancipation, I’m fed up with playing your Turkish stereotype. Now I’m gonna do a Tarantino film...¹

Postmigration in theatre and theory

Theatre, as an art form, is seldom considered a major social or theoretical mover today. However, since its founding in 2008, the Ballhaus Naunynstraße theatre in Kreuzberg, Berlin—the first theatre to actively position itself as “postmigrant”—has been instrumental in bringing the concept of postmigration into the public realm. The approach of the theatre is exemplified in the opening quotation above, a meta-theatrical moment taken from what is arguably the theatre’s most successful production to date, *Verrücktes Blut* (*Crazy Blood*). *Verrücktes Blut* by Nurkan Erpulat and Jens Hillje, is a co-production between the Ballhaus and the Ruhrtriennale which premiered in 2010, and was invited to the prestigious theatre festival the *Berliner Theatertreffen*, in 2011. In the closing scene of the play, the script has the actress playing Mariam, a headscarf-wearing schoolgirl, “break

character” in a fit of rage at the stereotyped nature of the roles she is expected to play in the German theatre: rather than continue to play the ethnicised roles ascribed to her, she claims she will create her own—and that this new role will contain some of the beauty but also the violence of a Tarantino. This claim speaks very much to the Ballhaus’ programmatic assertion of the need for active work on the diversity of the German theatrical landscape and its own reputation for quality, yet disruptive theatre which “barks from the third row”.² The success of plays such as *Verrücktes Blut* and its association with the label of postmigrant theatre has been such that “postmigrant” has emerged as a potential alternative, self-chosen descriptor to the more sociological categorisation of “people with a background of migration”, while young theatre practitioners today ask themselves whether their work is, or wants to be considered, “postmigrant theatre”.³

In its very construction, the term “postmigrant” clearly has associations with the postcolonial⁴ or even postracial.⁵ The Ballhaus theatre’s leadership apparently first came across the concept of postmigration

CONTACT Lizzie Stewart  elizabeth.stewart@kcl.ac.uk  Department of German, King's College London, Virginia Woolf Building, 22 Kingsway, London, WC2B 6LE, UK

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at an anglophone academic conference,⁶ the very sphere in which the theatre's own work is now often discussed.⁷ Which conference this was is not clear from the existing interviews but a conference titled "Postmigrant Turkish-German Culture: Transnationalism, Translation, Politics of Representation", which included readings from future collaborators of the Ballhaus such as Feridun Zaimoglu, was organised by Tom Cheesman in Swansea in 1998,⁸ only a few years after Gerd Baumann and Thijl Sunier's book *Post-Migration Ethnicity* appeared in 1995.⁹ In Cheesman's own work, which evolved into his highly regarded *Novels of Turkish German Settlement: Cosmopolite Fictions* (2007), the term "postmigrant literature" in fact disappears to be replaced with "literature of settlement".¹⁰ "Postmigrant" then re-emerges as a descriptor of literature only after its adoption by the Ballhaus, for example in Laura Peters' monograph *Stadttext und Selbstbild: Berliner Autoren der Postmigration nach 1989* (2012). Similarly, the adjective "postmigrant" only really establishes itself in the social sciences in the German context following its success in the cultural field: in their studies of contemporary German society both Regina Römhild and Naika Foroutan highlight the term's theatrical history over and above its development (or lack of) in earlier social science applications.¹¹ This intersection between theatre and theory has continued as analysis of the theatre's work becomes the basis for new theorisation in itself: for Deniz Utlu, an author associated with the Ballhaus, postmigrant theatre emerges as a label "under which political theatre is made by theatre practitioners 'of colour'", and for researcher Azadeh Sharifi, this means "telling stories from the margins and still knowing the centre".¹² Still somewhat unfixed and fluctuating, the term gathers meaning as it moves in and out of fields of theatre practice and theoretical reflection.

Here, I take as my departure one of the definitions to emerge from the Ballhaus itself. Shermin Langhoff, the artistic director of the Ballhaus from its inception until her move to the leadership of the Gorki Theatre, Berlin, in 2013, appears to have employed the term both as an act of pre-emptive self-labelling and as a means of establishing a strong profile for the Ballhaus in the competitive Berlin theatre market.¹³ Langhoff positions the word "postmigrant" as a "Kampfbegriff": a "polemical concept" or more literally a "term for doing battle with".¹⁴ This positions it first and foremost as a term important for the work it can *do*, rather than as a descriptor for what a particular form of theatre might *be*. In her words:

For us postmigrant means that we critically question the production and reception of stories about migration and about migrants which have been available

up to now and that we view and produce these stories anew, inviting a new reception.¹⁵

Much of the initial scholarship exploring postmigrant theatre to date has thus focused on the *histories* of migrant life in Germany engaged with by the theatre.¹⁶ In this article, however, I shift the focus to explore the ways in which postmigrant theatre as practised at the Ballhaus engages with the intersection of narratives of gender, sexuality, and migration.¹⁷

As scholars such as Yasemin Yildiz highlight, one dominant "story" produced in recent years has involved a shift from ethnonational to religious othering in the wake of changes to German citizenship law in the 2000s: making, for example, "Allah's daughters" out of "Turkish girls".¹⁸ Changing the subject in this way, Yildiz suggests, has also allowed a discourse to emerge which positions Muslim migrants as a threat to "European" sexual and gender rights.¹⁹ This is a discourse which has been growing across a range of European contexts, especially Dutch, French, and British, and which is also considered under the headings "sexual nationalism",²⁰ or "racialized sexuality".²¹ Its material manifestations include the introduction of new laws, such as the so-called "Muslim" test introduced by Baden-Württemberg in Germany in 2006 which probes the adherence of potential new citizens to values such as gay rights and women's rights,²² and the emergence of curious left-right alliances as, for example, feminists and gay rights campaigners join in condemnation of the Muslim faith and those with a background of migration who are associated with it.²³

In this article, I suggest that a broad view of the repertoire of the Ballhaus over the past 10 years shows a long-standing concern with precisely this development; whether it be within the theatre's highly successful run of premieres of work by award-winning director Nurkan Erpulat (2008; 2010; 2011), the academy of autodidact's programme of work with local groups of non-professionals (e.g. *Female Gaze*, 2016), or in the framing of the festival to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the bilateral Turkish-German recruitment agreements, which was curated under the provocatively gendered title of "Almanci—50 Jahre Scheinehe" ("Almanci—50 Years of Sham Marriage") in 2011. The most famous example of this is arguably *Schwarze Jungfrauen* (*Black Virgins*, 2006), a semi-documentary collection of ten monologues apparently based on interviews with young radical Muslim women, which first thrust postmigrant theatre into the spotlight with its provocative narratives of "Sex and Islam".²⁴ Katrin Sieg reads the play very convincingly as a challenge to "the current constellation, in which critique of gendered oppression is aligned with a static, essentialist, and supremacist concept of European culture".²⁵ This is a

constellation which, I suggest, brings us into the territory not simply of intersectionality—an awareness of the ways in which multiple forms of identification and discrimination intersect and bear down on individuals differently²⁶—but also, I would argue, sexual nationalism—where the incorporation of groups previously discriminated against on sexual/gendered grounds into the protectorate of the state simultaneously fosters racialised exclusions.²⁷ In this article I will focus not only on the racialisation of sexuality as theme in plays directed and co-written by Nurkan Erpulat and produced at the Ballhaus, such as *Verrücktes Blut* (*Crazy Blood*), *Lö Bal Almanya* (2010), *Jenseits. Bist du schwul oder bist du Türke* (*On the Other Side: Are You Gay or Are You Turkish?* 2008) but also on a particularly notable trope in which sexuality and ethnicised migration intersect, and which extends beyond Erpulat's work: the scenarios of striptease which occur across a range of plays with otherwise very different forms and foci. In doing so, I explore the gestures through which the theoretically aware postmigrant theatre as practised at the Ballhaus “view[s] [...] and invites a new reception of” this particular development.

My attention was first drawn to these gestures and scenes of undressing by Sieg's illuminating reading of the opening striptease scene created by the production team in the premiere production of *Schwarze Jungfrauen*. Although the opening scene is relatively short, the analysis of this scene becomes a way in for Sieg to sort through the broader, and seemingly contradictory socio-political discourses in which the play can be situated. Sieg reads this striptease “as an attempt to make visible the as-yet-unsolved contradictions of gender along with other categories of difference [...] operating in the European rhetoric of democracy”.²⁸ Here, rather than gesture functioning as expression of character and individuality it becomes explanatory and social: we see “the gest relevant to society, the gest that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances”.²⁹ That is to say *gestus*—a term which will be discussed in more detail in section three of this article. Building on Sieg's observation, then, I bring this particular scene into dialogue with the wider theorisation of sexual nationalism or racialised sexualities in the European and American context, in order to explore the ways in which this scenario of striptease mutates across the Ballhaus repertoire. Occurring in a manner sometimes punitive and sometimes playful, I suggest that striptease and disciplinary stripping emerge as a dominant gesture or even *gestus* in the theatre's repertoire, even when sexuality or gender may not appear to be central themes.

I consider this significant as research from the fields of sociology and critical theory which identifies

“the [European] entanglement of sexual politics with anti-Muslim discourse” on a legal and political level traces the ways in which “sexual liberation is used to frame Europe as the ‘avatar of both freedom and modernity’ (Butler, 2008:2) while depicting Muslim [or Muslim-coded] citizens as backwards and homophobic”.³⁰ However, the identification of these structures often leads to an air of lament or defeat. What now? Is it enough to trace these systems? Jasbir Puar, a key theorist in this field, is keen to avoid thinking of sexual nationalism, or her particular theorisation of the phenomenon, “homonationalism”, “as an accusation, an identity, a bad politics”.³¹ Instead she suggests we begin to think of it,

as an analytic to apprehend state formation and a structure of modernity: as an assemblage of geopolitical and historical forces, neoliberal interests [...], biopolitical state practices of population control, and affective investments in discourses of freedom, liberation, and rights.³²

Here my question is what theatre—an art form heavily dependent on the visual and affective, as well as on the construction of meaning both on and through bodies—might have to bring to this analytic.

In raising this question I also take my cue from Römheld's reading of the potential influence of the Ballhaus' postmigrant theatre on approaches to migration within sociology.

These productions proved not to be theatre by, for, and about Turkish migrants, but rather were concerned with the developments and circumstances, the transnational and postcolonial dimensions of a postmigrant society. It is this dramaturgical perspective which I would wish for Migration Studies.³³

By focusing on the work of the Ballhaus Naunynstraße—an activist as well as artistic institution—I want to explore ways in which awareness of the dynamic of sexual nationalism exceeds and is reacted to beyond the academic sphere. Further, I aim to question where attention to these already existent interventions might take us as academics: that is, to explore the ways in which postmigrant theatre practice might contribute to the attempt “to release conventional migration research from the position of exception which it has occupied until now, and to establish it as societal analysis”.³⁴

“Trousers down”, headscarf off: sexual governance in *Verrücktes Blut*

The critical exploration of the relationship between the racialised and islamified body and the demands of the German state is a consistent, yet little discussed, theme of the play with which this article opened, *Verrücktes Blut*. Set in a contemporary German classroom, *Verrücktes Blut* portrays a teacher's attempts to

teach Schiller's *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*, 1781) to a class of teenagers, the majority of whom have a background of migration. The chaotic class is interrupted by the appearance of a gun, brought into the classroom by one of the students. The teacher, Sonia, confiscates the gun but rather than removing it from the classroom, reaches breaking point and uses the loaded firearm to hold the class hostage for a lesson on Schiller and the concept of "aesthetic education". While the questions of honour, family, and individuality raised in *Die Räuber* are shown to have clear parallels, and so relevance, to the lives of the teenagers with a background of migration, the forced recognition of this created by the hostage situation calls into question Sonia's own grasp of the "enlightened" values she is supposedly imparting.³⁵

Although not its only concern, sexual nationalism becomes thematised in *Verrücktes Blut* on a number of levels, both narrative and gestic. Certainly, much of the initial tension between Sonia and her students is expressed around attitudes to sexuality and through gendered or sexualised language. Indeed, Sonia's first full line in the play is an attempt at regulation of her male students' behaviour to their female classmates. "Stop it, that is sexual harassment" (VB 5), she exclaims as Ferit, Hakim, and Bastian attempt to feel up school-girl Latifa. When the gun appears and falls into Sonia's hands, sexual language is used by the boys to first threaten her in an attempt to make her give them back the gun and then to express their rejection of her authority—a strategy which her reaction reveals has been ongoing:

SONIA: Don't call me that! I'm not a slut! [...] Now I want to know for once who always writes these primitive swearwords on the board, hmm, hmm hmm? Whoever wears a skirt is a slut? Hmm? [...] Are you all in on it together, you apes? (VB 18).

This appears to be part of the provocation for her subsequent shooting of the pistol into the air only a minute or two later, an act which cows her pupils into obedience, for a time at least. Act 1 thus initially seems to establish a clear boundary between Sonia—as establishment figure and simultaneous defender of women's rights—and her postmigrant class, whose sexuality is not only excessive, out of control, and threatening, but also repressive or regressive in its attitude to female bodies. However, Sonia's justified, feminist opposition to the names she is called by her pupils and to the sexual violence which lurks behind their treatment of each other, does not extend to a consideration of the violence she in turn—gun in one hand, Schiller in the other—enacts upon these same pupils. In her address of them as "apes", for example, she purchases feminist righteousness at the expense

of racialised othering, a purchase which reveals a connection between the two.

This becomes more explicit as the play progresses and the first of two stripping scenes emerges. Buoyed up by the possession of the pistol and the power this gives her over the group, in act 2 Sonia decides to teach Hakim a lesson about his use of the term "slut/whore":

SONIA: [...] Do you know what I'd like to do now? Let's take Hakim's trousers down and make a male slut out of him. [...] Come on, Latifa, take his trousers off. Pull his trousers down. [...] Trousers down. HEY. Trousers down. [...]

SONIA: Well, how do you feel?

HAKIM: Not good.

SONIA: Are you ashamed?

HAKIM: Yes. (VB 27–29)

Clearly Sonia's reversal of sexual violence here is not consistent with a feminism which attempts to create an equality that emancipates both sexes. Rather, she plays out a revenge fantasy on the body of her male student which not only reverses the occupation of positions of victim and perpetrator of sexual violence, but also exceeds this by turning linguistic threat into embodied experience. The abuse of power in the name of teaching western values which this scene encapsulates calls into question the ways in which these values are being instrumentalised.³⁶ Indeed, the image of the young, Muslim man (Hakim quotes the *Qu'ran* earlier in the play) who is purposefully humiliated by being stripped to his underwear can be read not only as an adult twist on the schoolyard game of pulling-down trousers. It also relates to assumptions which were circulating in the late 2000s in the wake of the use of sexual humiliation in Abu Ghraib about "the particularly intense shame with which Muslims experience homosexual and feminizing acts".³⁷ Here arguably, both Sonia and the playwrights respond to the way in which, in the post-9/11 context, the "Muslim body, spins out repetitively into folds of existence, cohering discourse, politics, aesthetics, affectivity";³⁸ Sonia by participating in this spinning out as a means of strengthening her own position, the playwrights by revealing and thus critiquing the violence of Sonia's civilising mission.

The fact that Sonja's desire to educate her students in the principles of aesthetic education is also connected to a desire to strip her students "free" of a particularly Muslim identity becomes further apparent in a second scene of disciplinary stripping which takes place in Act 4 of the play. Here, the intersection between the German philosophical and artistic canons and an anti-Islamic violence is played out as Sonia attempts to provoke her veiled female student,

Mariam, to remove her headscarf via a performance of a scene from Schiller's *Die Räuber*. The character of Hasan, in the role of Schiller's Franz, declares that he wishes to violently deflower Mariam's character, Amelia. The text of *Die Räuber* from which Hasan and Mariam are unenthusiastically working under Sonia's gaze and gunpoint, demands that Mariam/Amelia defends herself, which she does by half-heartedly pushing Hasan/Franz away. Sonia attempts to interject some passion into Mariam's performance by appealing to her sense of honour as a Muslim woman: "He wants to drag you to the chapel, force you into marriage [...] To mount you!—Well? What kind of Muslim are you?" (VB 48).

Encouraged by Sonia, Miriam's energy and attack—both on Hasan and on the role of Schiller's Amelia—begin to build into a violent crescendo. As Amelia's resistance grows into a moment of emancipatory rejection of the patriarchal demands on her body, so too does Mariam's identification with the role she is playing, and Sonia's investment in her emancipation of Mariam from the role of "oppressed" Muslim woman:

MARIAM: Ah! How different I feel! Now I breathe again—I feel strong as the snorting steed,

SONIA: Me too, yeeessss!

MARIAM: —ferocious as the tigress when she springs upon the ruthless destroyer of her cubs. Beggar, did he say! (*laughs*) then is the world turned upside down, beggars are kings, and kings are beggars! [...]

SONIA: Yes, free yourself from everything.

MARIAM: Be damned... (Shits, wankers, spastis, Kurd-fuckers, you can lick my arse...)

SONIA: Yes, away with the text, yes, now away with the headscarf.

MARIAM: Mmm, no.

SONIA: Yes, get rid of it all.

MARIAM: Nah, not doing it. (VB 49-50)³⁹

Initially Mariam's and Sonia's interests seem to intersect or even overlap here. In playing the role of a woman taking control of her own destiny in the face of the patriarchy that surrounds her, Mariam releases this energy in herself and begins to revel in the opportunity to stand up to Hasan. The shift in language which occurs in Mariam's third line in the quotation above seems incongruous but indicates the integration of the two roles. The scene is also played extremely comically by actress Nora Abdel-Maksoud who leaps from foot to foot at an increasingly high pace throughout, taking on the very modern movements of a boxer at the same time as the more archaic language of Schiller.⁴⁰ Although Mariam/Amelia is keen to break free of the worldly chains which her societal position tries to hold her in—as symbolised by the breaking of the costly pearl necklace—Mariam comes back out of the role of

Amelia in order to refuse Sonia's instruction to then divest herself of her headscarf. While for Sonia these two pieces of feminine outerwear are equally symbolic of female oppression, Mariam reads them differently: for her the headscarf is not incompatible with this newly won feminist energy or sense of liberated self-hood, rather Sonia's demand is.

Mariam's headscarf is, however, removed in the final act of the play—and through Mariam's own volition. The second act begins with a tussle between Sonia and one of the boys, Musa, in which Mariam ends up in possession of the gun. Having played Amelia so expertly, Mariam now takes on Sonia's previous role, repeating many of her demands: "Who is the slut here? Am I a slut? I'm a slut? (*aims at him. Eyes flicker to Sonja*). Trousers down" (VB 54). Enacting on the other students the violence which has been enacted on her, demonstrates, on one hand, her sympathy with much of what Sonia had been trying to teach her, but, on the other, the cycle of violence this disciplinary instance provokes. Sexual nationalism thus emerges as also an intra-community issue.⁴¹

It is in the grip of this exercise of absolute authority that Mariam removes her headscarf—not as an intentional moment of emancipation, but rather for the practical purpose of tying up her fellow pupil, the bully figure, Musa.

MARIAM: Here. Tie him up with the scarf.

Mariam very slowly takes off her scarf and throws it on the floor. A second of shock. Shaking. Miriam erupts.

MARIAM: (*Primal scream*) Grroughoääääää.

LATIFA: Mariam, what's up? What is going on?

MARIAM: Cool, cool, cool, I'm cool. (*Touches her hair, recoils from it.*) (VB, 56-57)

While this moment is more to do with imprisonment than liberation, the manner in which Mariam's unveiling is played, as if "miraculously physically electrified by 70 years of women's emancipation in one fell swoop",⁴² creates one of the most dramatic—and comically exaggerated—moments in the whole play. As Hanna Voss notes "In this scene the completely exaggerated manner of representation and the symbolic loading of a simple matter disrupts the Realism which has otherwise primarily dominated the manner of performance".⁴³ The excess of movement thus highlights the excess of symbolism placed upon the headscarf and its removal in this context. Voss goes on to situate this moment within a taxonomy of performative and intellectual reflection which she develops within her monograph. Here, however I want to explore that moment of interruption, crystallisation, and pointed physical excess in relation to a

more established tradition in which “The actor emphasises certain physical gestures as a way of pointing to connections that lie beyond the scope of naturalistic representation”;⁴⁴ Bertolt Brecht’s concept of *gestus*.

“Sexual orientation: Turkish”: *Lö Bal Almanya and Jenseits. Bist du schwul oder bist du Türke*

What leads me to make the leap from the clear-cut presence of a particular gesture to the more complex, and more ambiguous, term *gestus* here? Meg Mumford highlights that *gestus* relates to “gesture as socially encoded expression”: whether “movement that is consciously employed” or “the moulded and sometimes subconscious body language of a person from a particular social class or workplace”.⁴⁵ This speaks very much to Meyda Yeğenoğlu’s assertion in a different context—a feminist reading of Orientalism—that “the notion of the body as the stuff of inscription of social norms, practices, and values can be extended to the discussion of veiling”.⁴⁶ While stripping and striptease are perceived in Orientalist representations as ways of freeing female bodies from inscription, Yeğenoğlu draws on Foucault’s reading of bodies in power to highlight that “not veiling” is as much an inscription of norms as “veiling” is.⁴⁷ The body is thus exposed as “the medium through which power operates”.⁴⁸ In Brecht’s political theatre, the concern is similarly to do with making visible the operations of power in which bodies are caught. For Brecht, however, it is the use of gesture—physical action—which makes this legible. *Gestus* is thus employed when an actor or director “chooses significant gestures and then shows us how they are the result of particular social and historical forces”.⁴⁹

As theatre scholar Elin Diamond puts it, *gestus* is significant because “the gestic moment in a sense explains the play, but it also exceeds the play, opening it to the social and discursive ideologies that inform its production”.⁵⁰ Diamond herself focuses on exploring this in relationship to a feminist gestic criticism, arguing that “[b]ecause the semiosis of *Gestus* involves the gendered bodies of spectator, actor/subject, and character, all working together but never harmoniously, there can be no fetishization and no end to signification”.⁵¹ I am far from the first to extend this gestic criticism to include both male and female gendered bodies, as well as racialisation, however doing so with respect to particular examples from the Ballhaus allows me to give some indication of the renewed potential for political intervention via not only the words said on stage but also the gestures created there. In *Verrücktes Blut*, for example, Diamond’s reading of *gestus* and the actress’ vibrating body seem to

intersect with one another, and in doing so to interrupt the “spinning out” of the Muslim body into discourse marker noted by Puar, redirecting the energy and potential for seemingly contradictory connections to be made and drawing our attention to the often counterintuitive formations of sexual nationalism.

As the creation of an onstage semiotic system, Mumford further highlights that *gestus* “cannot be achieved through a single gesture from a lone actor in isolation, but is dependent upon the relationship between this gesture and the social context developed through the performance”.⁵² Taking this further, here I also want to ask whether this relationship might be extended throughout a repertoire. In Nurkan Erpulat and Tunçay Kulaoğlu’s *Lö Bal Almanya* (2011),⁵³ for example, we see not only another instance of, but an extension of the “electrified” fit of sexual emancipation in response to the removal of the headscarf already discussed in *Verrücktes Blut*.

In *Lö Bal*, an all-singing, all-dancing critical romp through 50 years of Turkish migration to Germany, this occurs within the final 20 minutes of the play which are devoted to an extended parody of Necla Kelek, “a Turkish-German sociologist and outspoken critic of Islam”.⁵⁴ This scene opens with Sesede Terziyan, the same actress who plays Sonia Kehlich in *Verrücktes Blut*,⁵⁵ appearing on stage in sunglasses and a black headscarf, alongside a male character who is trying to dismantle a mosque-shaped alarm clock. A sausage is delivered to the figure played by Terziyan, which she proceeds to devour dramatically, emitting bestial noises and sexual growls as she does so. As she snacks, she throws off her headscarf, stroking her legs erotically and lifting her skirts to reveal suspenders. In the midst of this sexual fit, the figure played by Terziyan begins to choke on the sausage, collapses briefly, but then rises again laughing ecstatically. This pattern of choking, collapse, and ecstasy repeats a total of three times. The vignette is then followed by a scene in which Terziyan takes on the role of an “engaged sociologist” known for her work on “Islam and integration” and her “reports from the interior of Turkish life in Germany” (LBA), a clear reference to Kelek whose controversial Islam-critical bestseller from 2006 translates as *The Foreign Bride: A Report from the Interior of Turkish Life in Germany*.⁵⁶ In this role, Terziyan delivers a fifteen-minute electrified speech—twitching, spitting, and screaming her way through—on Islam and its incompatibility with “German values” (LBA).

As the audience will soon become aware, the impetus for this scene is an article by Kelek which was published in *Emma*, the feminist magazine established by Alice Schwarzer, and which Terziyan will go on to quote verbatim in the speech which follows. An

extract is worth quoting at length as it provides an example of the logic which these final scenes of *Lö Bal* parodically respond to:

I was 18 [...] when on the way home from work I gathered together all of my courage to enact a plan I had long decided on: eating a bratwurst. [...] I ordered my first bratwurst and hesitated; I was afraid that with the first bite the earth might open up and swallow me. [...] [N]othing happened. [...] I had sinned and felt good doing it. I sensed that I might feel the same way about other forbidden things [...] It has taken 30 years for me to feel able to confess to my bratwurst sin in public. The freedom we consider self-evident here in this country scares Muslim women.⁵⁷

As dietary epitome of German culture, as phallic signifier, and as *haram* pork product, the triple—and very blunt—symbolism of the sausage forms a connection between freedom from religious authority, sexuality, and the German national context. The Ballhaus' gestural and gestic reworking of this "script" thus makes visible what remains implicit in the eroticised imagery and phrasing of Kelek's writing: the gesture of stripping links the discarding of the headscarf and the eating of pork products, i.e. the rejection of common signifiers of Muslim identity, with the sudden outpouring of sexual energy in the character's exaggerated movements and vocalisations. Via this excessive display, the striptease becomes part of a *gestus* which both demonstrates the culturalisation of sexuality in the German context and reveals the disharmonies within and caused by that culturalisation, "the actor's body [becoming] involved in a dynamic relationship with its social contexts as a way of establishing a visible connection between the two".⁵⁸

Notably this is the case not only in the unveiling or stripping of female characters but also—as already seen with respect to *Verrücktes Blut*—in the stripping of male characters. It is here that sexual nationalism, and its objectification or making-visible through *gestus* becomes a particularly useful means of making connections between the repositioning of women's rights as a "European" value,⁵⁹ and the simultaneous positioning of gay rights in a similar manner.⁶⁰ The latter is a theme addressed by Nurkan Erpulat and Tunçay Kulaoğlu's 2008 play, *Jenseits. Bist du schwul oder bist du Türke* (*On the Other Side—Are You Gay or Are You Turkish?*).⁶¹ A semi-documentary piece, like *Schwarze Jungfrauen, Jenseits*⁶² arose from interviews, this time conducted with homosexual Turkish men in Germany, which were then shaped into the narratives of five main figures. As Kira Kosnick highlights, "[t]he title of the play names an invisibility as well as an apparent categorical impossibility", an impossibility that arises out of discourses "that

selectively produce homosexuality as a key symbol of enlightened individualism and tolerance linked to Western modernity".⁶³ This selectivity is one which Erpulat himself, a co-founder of the Berlin group Lesbians and Gays from Turkey (GladT e.V.), is clearly very aware of and has spoken out about in interviews:

Of course that [homophobia in the Turkish community] is a problem [...] But the way in which it is discussed causes me misgivings. Something is distorted in the process and serves old prejudices again albeit from a different position.⁶⁴

Erpulat and Kulaoğlu's play very clearly identifies these discourses and the distortions present in them in the opening scene of the production, where we encounter the five main figures of the play, outside the gates of heaven—that is to say in the beyond or "on the other side".⁶⁵ Here the characters' further transit into the appropriate paradise is hindered until it can be determined where they belong—with their fellow "Turks" or fellow "Gays". The situation is introduced by a sixth figure, a female singer in a neon, space-age wig and dress who occupies the position of angelic guide to the afterlife. In tones reminiscent of an airline stewardess, she announces the dilemma which their entrance into heaven is presenting to the appropriate authorities and puts 100 minutes on an onstage clock: the time in which the men have to decide their affiliation and mark the appropriate box on a form she distributes. Each of the men are thus prompted to tell their stories of being caught between ascriptions of Turkish and gay identity and their own attachments to those labels, with each narrative being divided from the others by a song from the angelic presence.

The framing of the identitarian dilemma which functions as the device for prompting these stories is familiar to anyone involved with border regimes. As reviewer Johanna Lühr, writing for the *Tagesspiegel* puts it, "one might also be reminded of an office of the naturalisation authorities".⁶⁶ This framing—although somewhat unexpected in the context of documentary theatre—playfully points to the broader framework which provokes the characters' "dilemma" into visibility, and in which the narratives the audience is about to encounter should be understood: regimes which control who goes where, and by extension who has access to which rights and privileges in the nation-state. The play thus takes the emphasis on loyalty to one identificatory category which has long structured the German approach to Turkish-German citizenship and cultural belonging in particular and shifts it to expose a new reconfiguration of this dichotomy: its articulation around gay rights and sexuality.

In *Jenseits*, each figure has their own story of the struggles they face at the intersection of these identificatory positions. While the stories of the first two figures Eren and Levent highlight homosexual islamophobia and Turkish homophobia respectively, for the third figure, Burak, Islamic identity and his homosexuality are fully compatible: as he declares in the opening line of his monologue, “The God that I know doesn’t give a damn about that [homosexuality]” (J). Azad on the other hand has internalised a conflict between his religious and ethnic identity; he remains riven by the contrast between his own relationships and lifestyle, and the expectations which he has inherited from his mother’s Yezidi family. Finally, Bosnian-Turkish Ali represents a very different set of experiences: those of a coke-addicted party-lover and father of one.⁶⁷

A whole spectrum of sexual experiences and identities are thus expressed both through the five figures’ own stories and through the interlocutors they revoice within these narratives. At the same time no story is allowed to remain uncontested—frequent interruptions come from the other on-stage narrators in the form of questions, coaxing, abuse, and sexual advances. Despite this carefully constructed plurality of narrative, Kosnick argues that the media reception of the play focused on Germany as a space which afforded the right to family life to homosexual Turks and thus created a “sensationalist visibility” for the play and its subjects; a visibility which functioned to reinforce rather than disrupt the dynamics of sexual nationalism in the Federal Republic.⁶⁸ In the following, however, it is the very practices through which the Ballhaus engages visibility and the affective dimensions of gesture that interest me here, as I believe attention to the ways in which these narratives are framed and reworked on a gestural level takes the analysis in a very different direction.

Once again, several of the monologues are accompanied, introduced, or interrupted by, gestures of self-exposure and stripping. On one level, these physical interludes function, like the singer’s songs, and the striptease scene in *Schwarze Jungfrauen*,⁶⁹ to break up the monologues. At the end of monologue one, for example, Eren tears open his shirt revealing bondage gear beneath his conservative exterior, creating a salacious visual counterpart or illustration of the undermining of pre-judgements which is the focus of his monologue. At other points, however, these stripping elements stage the conflicts and webs of social pressures which shape the narratives. In monologue three, Burak enthusiastically strips naked not for seductive reasons but to demonstrate the sexual self-exposure needed for him to avoid army call-up in Turkey. As he explains, by showing naked

pictures of himself receiving penetration to the relevant authorities, he could prove his homosexuality and thus avoid the otherwise compulsory military service. In monologue four, Azad strips in a more naturalistic presentation of preparation for joining his lover in the on-stage bed as he explains his part-Yezidi family’s negative attitudes to his homosexuality, which would exclude him from the Yezidi community, and his own, homonormative, desire for children and a “traditional idea of family” (LBA). These examples of stripping bring not only the question of audience voyeurism to the fore in the context of documentary theatre as was the case with *Schwarze Jungfrauen*,⁷⁰ in the latter two examples, they also underscore the relationship between the sexualised individual body and the body politic.

This relationship is further emphasised in the opening to the third monologue. Here three-quarters of the men move into line and hold up their passports for inspection, then, on the signal given by a clap, turn around and raise their bottoms in the air, suggesting equivalence between the inspection of the two objects. On one hand this connotes a comic—but in fact only slight—exaggeration of the intimate physical inspection procedures which the first generation of Turkish guest workers had to undergo in order to gain work permits for Germany. On the other, however, the emphasis on bottoms suggests a particular scrutiny of sexuality and attitudes towards sexuality required of the immigrant to Germany or the citizen with a background of migration today. As Paul Scheibelhofer puts it:

The early “guest worker” regime was mainly interested in questions of bodily health, strength and resilience, as migrant men were primarily seen as work objects. [...] Contemporary politics of governing migration and integration construct images of archaic migrant masculinity to define unwanted populations and legitimate differentiated techniques of evaluation, inquiry and exclusion.⁷¹

Scheibelhofer illustrates his point with specific reference to the so-called Muslim test introduced in states such as Baden-Württemberg from 2006,⁷² two years before the premiere of *Jenseits* in 2008. Parts of the test also probe applicants’ values: questions include “how they would react if they learned that their son was gay”.⁷³ Perhaps it is no surprise then that while engaging with the emancipatory potential and public recognition of giving voice, in *Jenseits* we also see the return of the gesture of undressing the body—this time more explicitly for inspection—as a means of working through the regulatory role of sexuality in concepts of German citizenship today.

Indeed, both *Lö Bal* and *Jenseits*, I suggest, use *gestus* to engage with what Fatima El-Tayeb terms a

“queering of ethnicity”—a “politicized creolization of traditions and identities” which “acknowledges the fact that supposedly incompatible cultures and histories have already merged in European practices and uses the ‘improper’, ‘inauthentic’ and impossible positionality of racialized Europeans as the starting point for situated, specifically European strategies of resistance.”⁷⁴ In both of the plays explored in this section, *gestus*—an “interweaving of sensual activities (gestures) and ideas or social meanings (gists)”, in order “to open up for scrutiny behaviour that has been learned, that was liable to change”⁷⁵—emerges as both example of already merged theatrical history⁷⁶ and enabler of strategic inauthenticity of representation even in the documentary context.

Postmigrant theatre and the gestic analytic

Theater is theory, or a shadow of it [...]

In the act of seeing there is already theory.⁷⁷

While the plays I have focused on thus far are products of collaborations between Ballhaus dramaturgs and director Nurkan Erpulat, the thematisation of sexual nationalism extends beyond Erpulat’s plays into the broader repertoire. More recent plays, such as *Süpermänner (Supermen)* by İdil Üner, for example, focus not only on “[t]ea crazy patriarchs, [...] batter-happy machos, diligent welfare recipients, hot-spurs scratching their nuts”, but also explore the assumption that “[t]hey don’t have any problems [...] They are the problem.”⁷⁸ In the final part of this article, I want to conclude by suggesting that this may also be the case for the *gestus* of stripping and striptease examined so far.

As we have seen in the discussions of several plays by Erpulat, gestural intervention becomes more visible still when scenes of stripping are taken together across a body of work. Notably, the work which was the catalyst for this article was *not* one which Erpulat was directly involved in, however, suggesting that this *gestus* is not limited to his *oeuvre*. Broadening the view reveals scenes of striptease also taking place elsewhere in the Ballhaus repertoire, such as in Michael Ronen’s production of Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s *Perikızı* in 2010. There a stripping of the eponymous female protagonist by two German feminists, not present in the original dramatic text, was inserted by the production team; a stripping which is intended by the relevant characters to be emancipatory but in Ronen’s production delivers the protagonist vulnerable into the hands of a ringmaster who rapes her.⁷⁹ Once again, the violent and disciplinary effects of a coalition between emancipatory movements and the positioning of Muslim culture as threat become visible.

While Erpulat wrote and directed in tandem with dramaturgs such as Kulaoğlu and Hillje based at the Ballhaus, blurring the lines between text and performance as “originatory” scripts, it is curious that play-texts such as *Schwarze Jungfrauen*, and *Perikızı*, which were written prior to and separate from further development in performance, also contain stripping scenes not originally in the dramatic text. This suggests that what we see here is a *gestus* emerging not just from an individual writer-director, but also from the dramaturgical department, the devising practices with actors, or the Ballhaus more broadly. If Brecht’s work with *gestus* and dialectical theatre meant that “actors had to ‘learn to think “dramaturgically”’ under Brecht [...] to function as their own dramaturg, analysing their roles and their relationship with others through the dialectical prism”,⁸⁰ I therefore want to suggest that the *gestus* of the Ballhaus points to a dramaturgical toolkit for addressing the assemblages of sexual nationalism we, and the Ballhaus itself, seem caught in currently: a means of exploring “a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism and sexuality”,⁸¹ through a focus on the body as bridge between broader discourses and lived experience.

In an interview with *Freitext* in 2013, the year in which she moved from the Ballhaus to the Gorki, artistic director Shermin Langhoff articulated her own position—and that of postmigrant theatre—as somewhere between these two poles:

On one hand I have an academic discourse, which is much further developed, which I like to read, to appreciate and to be involved in thinking about; and on the other hand I have reality and the ideologised discussion of the mainstream. We cannot afford to only be engaged in creating counter images. The true strength which art can have, that is to say art *itself* showing utopias, visions, ways out, is a very important point.⁸²

For those interested in postmigrant theatre in Germany—as it exists and as it may yet still develop—a focus on *gestus* as a means of thinking through, rather than mirroring such ideology, also reveals the strong hand the dramaturgical department has had to play in both the aesthetics and the politics of the Ballhaus’ in-house repertoire. As dramaturg and co-artistic director Tunçay Kulaoğlu explained in a 2013 interview, “As political activists we consciously turned to art as a means to mobilise people”.⁸³ Attention to *gestus* thus further highlights the connections between dramaturgy on stage and the dramaturgy of the Ballhaus itself as it carved a new role in the German theatrical landscape.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the analysis of a postmigrant *gestus* presented here, and Langhoff’s emphasis on “art *itself* showing utopias, visions, ways out”—suggest what the postmigrant theatre may have to offer to the social and

political sciences more broadly in their exploration of both postmigration and sexual nationalism—not a further object of study, but a space and medium for exploring new ways of seeing and of acting; a concrete link between theory and practice.

With this in mind, my final question is whether a gestic analytic might also be brought to bear on the term “postmigrant/postmigration” itself? Certainly, a nexus of competing and often paradoxical positions or social pressures are staged within the term: the proximity to and difference from postcolonialism; the tension between repeating and challenging reductive and marginalising framing of those with experience of migration; its usage as normative descriptor versus transformative lens. In the theatrical sphere, the social actors (directors, artistic directors, actors, dramaturges, viewers, reviewers) who engage it might often be said to do so in a manner which displays a degree of distance: pointing to it, rather than identifying as it.⁸⁵ The very utterance of the term becomes “that moment [...] in which contradictory social attitudes in both text and society are made heuristically visible to spectators” which is typical of *gestus*.⁸⁶ Rather than attempting to soothe out the dissonances, contradictions and intertwining histories it carries, the gestic analytic highlights the value of the term “postmigration” as the meeting point which makes these conflicts visible, historicising our attempts to approach the idea as we make them.

Notes

1. Erpulat and Hillje, *Verrücktes Blut* (2010), 63.
2. Kömürçü Nobrega, “We Bark from.”
3. Question raised by audience member at the event “10 Jahre Postmigrantisches Theater—Narrative des Postmigrantisches Theaters: Repräsentation, Erinnerungsarbeit und Geschichtsschreibung,” curated by Onur Suzan Kömürçü Nobrega, Ballhaus Naunynstraße, Berlin, 24 May 2016.
4. Yildiz, “Postmigrantische Perspektiven,” 21.
5. El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch*, 11–13; 16.
6. Shermin Langhoff, interviewed in Fanizadeh, “Wir inszenieren kein Getto-Theater.”
7. See, for example, the recent seminar on “(Post) Migrant Theater: Now and Then” held at the German Studies Association in Atlanta, Georgia, 6th–8th October 2017. Presenters included Claudia Breger, Meryem Deniz, Emily Gooding, Britta Kallin, Priscilla Layne, Mert Bahadır Reisoğlu, Hannah Schwadron, Ahmed Shah, Azadeh Sharifi, Katrin Sieg. Several of their presentations and the discussions we engaged in there spoke to the points raised in this article concerning the Ballhaus and postmigrant theatre/the concept of postmigration more generally. Unfortunately this event occurred after I received the proofs for this article, so I can only encourage interested readers to keep an eye out for forthcoming publications from these colleagues.
8. Cheesman, *Novels of Turkish German Settlement*, viii.

9. Baumann and Sunier, *Post-Migration Ethnicity*.
10. Cheesman, *Novels of Turkish German Settlement*.
11. Römhild, “Jenseits ethnischer Grenzen,” 46; Widmann, “Naika Foroutan.”
12. Sharifi, “Ich rufe meine Schwester,” 104.
13. Wahl, “Theaterpionierin Langhoff.”
14. Schaper, “Nach dem Theatercoup.”
15. Shermin Langhoff interviewed in Schacht, “50 Jahre Scheinehe.”
16. Examples include: Kalkan, “Searching for Identity,” Sieg, “Class of 1989.”
17. Nora Haakh also highlights that “[i]n both the [public] debate and the theatrical negotiation of that debate islamification and gendering emerge as central points” (10). Although also addressing a number of the plays I examine here, Haakh’s conclusion focuses on “fictive Islam” on and off-stage, and the stages which the Ballhaus’ strategies of de-essentialisation have gone through between 2006 and 2011. “Islamisierte Körper auf der Bühne.” The thesis is only available in partial form currently, but Haakh will publish a monograph in 2018.
18. Yildiz, “Turkish Girls, Allah’s Daughters.”
19. Ibid.
20. See, for example: Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens, “Sexual Politics”; Jaunait, Le Renard, and Marten, “Nationalismes sexuels?”; “Women’s Rights, Gay Rights.”
21. Bilge and Schiebelhofer, “New Politics of Racialised Sexualities.”
22. See Scheibelhofer, “Health Check to Muslim Test.”
23. See Bracke, “Saving”; El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch*, 93.
24. *Theater heute*, 47.5 (2006).
25. Sieg, “Black Virgins,” 152.
26. Cf. Lutz and Supik, *Framing Intersectionality*.
27. Cf. Mepschen et al., “Sexual Politics.” Jasbir Puar contrasts the intersectional “knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity” with the assemblage which is “more attuned to interwoven forces”: “Queer Times, Queer Assemblages,” 128.
28. Sieg, “Black Virgins,” 179.
29. Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 104–105. Translation Willett’s.
30. Mepschen, Duyvendak, Tonkens, “Sexual Politics,” 963.
31. Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” 337.
32. Ibid.
33. Römhild, “Jenseits ethnischer Grenzen,” 46.
34. Yildiz, “Postmigrantische Perspektiven,” 22.
35. Cf. Layne, “Between Play and Mimicry,” 53–54.
36. Cf. Layne, “Between Play and Mimicry”; Landry, “German Youth.”
37. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 83. See also p. 91.
38. Ibid., 87.
39. Several scenes from Schiller’s play are merged in Mariam’s dialogue. Her first two utterances are from Act 3, Scene 1, her third from Act 1 Scene 3. Translations of Schiller are taken from: Friedrich Schiller, *The Robbers: A Tragedy*.
40. Erpulat and Hillje, *Verrücktes Blut*, 2012. Excerpt viewable at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZDBPBVG0PM>.
41. Bracke, “Saving,” 242–244.
42. Landry, “German Youth,” 113.
43. Voss, *Reflexion von ethnischer Identität(szuweisung)*, 201.
44. Barnett, *Brecht in Practice*, 97.

45. Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht*, 53.
46. Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 115. See also Sieg, "Black Virgins."
47. Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 115.
48. *Ibid.*, 22.
49. Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht*, 56. Emphasis Mumford's.
50. Diamond, "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory," 90.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht*, 59.
53. References hereafter in-text as (LBA) are to the 2011 in-house recording kindly provided by Ballhaus Naunynstraße. Excerpt viewable at <https://vimeo.com/16220419>.
54. Landry, "German Youth," 113.
55. As Landry highlights this recalls Kelek's name ("German Youth," 113). Landry also notes the direct criticism of Kelek in Erpulat's *Lo Bal Almanya* (*ibid.*, 112, n. 26).
56. Kelek, *Die fremde Braut*. On Kelek see Sieg, "Black Virgins," 163–168.
57. Kelek, "Meine persönliche Himmelsreise". On Alice Schwarzer see Sieg, "Black Virgins," 164; 175–176.
58. Barnett, *Brecht in Practice*, 95.
59. As identified by Katrin Sieg in her analysis: "Black Virgins."
60. On the overlaps and differences between these see Bracke, "Saving."
61. See also Benbow, *Marriage in Turkish German Popular Culture*, 117–144; Kosnick, "Sexuality and Migration Studies."
62. Erpulat and Kulaoğlu, *Jenseits*. References hereafter in-text as (J) are to the in-house recording kindly provided by Ballhaus Naunynstraße. Publicity images viewable at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ballhausnaunynstrasse-presse/albums/72157624295046974>.
63. Kosnick, "Sexuality and Migration Studies," 122.
64. Nurkan Erpulat in Schlagenwerth, "Nurkan Erpulats Stück."
65. "Jenseits" indicates the transgression of a spiritual or locational and physical divide.
66. Lühr, "Dann bist du draußen."
67. For detailed analysis of the individual narratives see Benbow, *Marriage in Turkish German Popular Culture*, 138–44.
68. Kosnick, "Sexuality and Migration Studies," 131.
69. Cf. Sieg, "Black Virgins."
70. *Ibid.*
71. Scheibelhofer, "Health Check to Muslim Test," 319.
72. Abolished 2011.
73. Scheibelhofer, "Health Check to Muslim Test," 327.
74. El-Tayeb, "'Gays Who Cannot Properly Be Gay,'" 89. El-Tayeb discusses Kanak Attak, a movement several associates of the Ballhaus were involved in, in *Undeutsch*, 137–161.
75. Mumford, *Bertolt Brecht*, 55.
76. Erpulat notes his familiarity with Brecht in interviews. E.g. Schwartz, "Ich war schon immer fremd!"
77. Herbert Blau, quoted in Diamond, "Brechtian Theory," 84.
78. English-language descriptor provided at <http://www.ballhausnaunynstrasse.de/auffuehrung/66634871>.
79. Özdamar, *Perikızı*. Extract of Ronen's production viewable at <https://vimeo.com/34247529>. For detailed discussion of this play see Stewart, *Staging New German Realities*.
80. Barnett, *Brecht in Practice*, 117.
81. Puar, "Rethinking Homonationalism," 337.
82. Carvahlo, Hillje, Kulaoğlu, and Langhoff, "Im besten Fall," 12. Italics not in original German but added here to convey the emphasis on this word created by the repetition of "selber" before each noun in the original.
83. *Ibid.*, 9.
84. Cf. Haakh, "Islamisierte Körper auf der Bühne," 9.
85. Cf. discussions at "10 Jahre Postmigrantisches Theater."
86. Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, 77.

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Notes on contributor



Lizzie Stewart is a Lecturer in Modern Languages, Culture, and Society at KCL. Her research focuses on cultures of post/migration, specifically theatre and migration in contemporary Germany. Recent publications include a special issue of *Oxford German Studies* on Emine Sevgi Özdamar (2016). Her first monograph, *Staging New German Realities: Turkish-German Scripts of*

Postmigration is forthcoming with Palgrave Macmillan.

ORCID

Lizzie Stewart  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8893-9113>

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