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Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism, Volume 36, Number 1, Fall 2021,
pp. 183-191 (Article)

Published by The University of Kansas, Department of Theatre and Dance

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/dtc.2021.0029>

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Large-Scale Collaborative Research Projects in Theatre and Performance Studies: Resources, Politics, and Ethics in the Margins of Europe during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Staging National Abjection: Theatre and Politics in Turkey and Its Diasporas is a research project funded by the European Research Council's Starting Grants program. Building on the initial insights of the project, the authors study collaboration as a performative process. They analyze the promises and risks involved in large-scale collaborative research projects and how they unfold in the context of Turkish academia and the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors examine how they manage their responsibilities to fellow members of their research team, to other members of Turkish academia, to the minoritarian communities they work with, and to the broader public who funds their research. Finally, they discuss how they work toward collective care and empowerment while negotiating the demands of globalized neoliberal academia as well as the oppressive sociopolitical environment in Turkey and explore the limits of their scholarly and ethical endeavors.

Keywords: *collaboration; Turkey; theatre; European Research Council; neoliberalism*

Theoretically challenging or methodologically innovative subjects in theatre and performance studies can be best, if not only, studied through collaborative research. Large-scale collaborative research projects, however, have demanding requirements in terms of resources and infrastructure. In theatre and performance studies, and the humanities in general, funding for such projects is rare and often available only through national or supranational bodies. An important funding scheme that is open to scholars in our field is the European Research Council's (ERC) Starting, Consolidator, and Advanced Grants, which provide researchers with funds up to 1.5, 2, and 2.5 million euros, respectively.¹ The ERC grants enable the principal investigators to establish a research group to work on their projects for up to five years at any scientific institution in Europe or associated countries. Each academic institution and national context, however, comes with

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diverse opportunities and challenges, which strongly influence the collaborative research efforts.

This article presents the initial insights of a project supported by the ERC Starting Grants program, titled *Staging National Abjection: Theatre and Politics in Turkey and Its Diasporas*, which started in May 2020 at the Faculty of Communication at Kadir Has University in Istanbul, Turkey.² Bringing together the perspectives of the project's principal investigator Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay, graduate student researchers İlyas Deniz Çınar, Gamze Tosun, and Şeyda Nur Yıldırım, and the project administrator Jale Karabekir, we analyze the promises and risks involved in large-scale collaborative research projects and how they unfold in the context of Turkish academia and the COVID-19 pandemic. Studying collaboration as a performative process, we approach our work from a critical perspective. We examine how we manage our responsibilities to fellow members of our research team, to other members of Turkish academia, to the minoritarian communities we work with, and to the broader public who funds our research. Finally, we discuss how we work toward collective care and empowerment while negotiating the demands of globalized neoliberal academia as well as the oppressive sociopolitical environment in Turkey and explore the limits of our scholarly and ethical endeavors.

Staging National Abjection argues that nation-building processes and the cultural activities that facilitate them comprise not only of creating "imagined communities"³ but also of "national abjection": the construction and maintenance of perceptual and conceptual borders around the self and jettisoning that which is deemed objectionable.⁴ As a collective form of live performance, historically entangled with ritual and politics, theatre has played a vital role in community and nation-building as well as in the processes of national abjection, and Turkey presents an excellent case study for exploring these dynamics. The project analyzes not so much how the Turkish nation has produced theatre, but rather the vital role theatre has played in the constitution of "the Turkish nation" as well as its others. To understand such complex processes, *Staging National Abjection* covers a diverse array of performances, spanning from the rise of European-style theatre in the Ottoman Empire in the mid-nineteenth century to contemporary productions.

Despite Turkey's rich theatre cultures, critical scholarship in the field has remained relatively limited.⁵ The focus has mostly been on the Turkish dramatic canon, mainstream productions by major private and public theatre companies, explicitly political theater practices associated almost exclusively with the Left, and more recently popular productions by independent companies, often labeled as "alternative theatre."⁶ To complement the existing literature, *Staging National Abjection* combines archival and ethnographic research methods to explore Turkey's rich yet largely ignored minoritarian theatre cultures. Our case studies include Armenian theatre productions before and after the genocide, queer dramas

and operas, and Kurdish, Islamic, Jewish, Greek, and Alevi theatre productions in Turkey and its diasporas. In bringing together such diverse case studies, our aim is not to construct a master narrative about minoritarian theatre practices in Turkey. On the contrary, the scope of our project and the collaborative nature of our work allow us to explore the complex connections, conflicts, tensions, and intersections within and across Turkey's minoritarian theatre cultures.

Our preliminary research on Jewish theatre, for instance, has shown how the eminent Jewish playwright Beki L. Bahar in her history play *İkiyüzbininci Gece* (The Two Hundred Thousandth Night) accused Ottoman Greeks of propagating anti-Semitism in the Ottoman Empire while reproducing the Islamicized myth of Ottoman hospitality.⁷ In her historiographical essays, Bahar also denies the existence of Jews among the *köçeks*—popular queer male dancers who entertained men in the Ottoman Empire—to protect the community from being associated with sexual abjection as well.⁸ Islamic playwrights, on the other hand, have often disseminated anti-Semitic messages since the rise of the genre in the 1960s. An early example of the plays portraying Jewish characters as evil traitors is *Moskof Sephası* (The Russian Gallows) by Hasan Nail Canat, who is often recognized as the founder of Islamic theatre.⁹ The three-act play recounts the heroic story of two Crimean Turkish brothers who are betrayed by a Jewish doctor conspiring with the Soviet government against Turkish Muslims. Another important work was the preacher Mustafa Bayburtlu's anti-communist play *Kızıl Pençe* (The Red Claw).¹⁰ The four-act play narrates the story of the workers' occupation of a factory, organized by an evil Jew pretending to be a Muslim Turk. The play gained notoriety in the 2010s when the media discovered that the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's current president, acted in an adaptation of the play under the title *Mas-Kom-Yah* (Mas-Com-Jew), short for "The Mason, the Communist, the Jew" in 1979.¹¹

Today, as Islamic groups compete for political power and resources in Turkey and its diasporas, theatre has emerged as a vibrant site for this contestation. Meanwhile, members of the Alevi religious minority in Turkey's European diaspora produce documentary plays about the many massacres they have been subjected to in their efforts to transfer and transform trauma and to gain official recognition as a minority. Theatre makers like the Kurdish trans feminist stand-up comic Esmeray explore their experiences of abjection from intersectional perspectives.

Our collaborative approach to diverse themes and case studies reveals how specific genres and aesthetic strategies have served different political projects. Hülya Yakut's *Bediüzzaman Oratoryosu* (The Bediüzzaman Oratorio)¹² and İknâ Sariaslan's oratorio *Tare Tar Akhtamar* (Akhtamar across the Ages) (2012) both challenge the hegemonic politics of historiography in Turkey. *Bediüzzaman Oratoryosu* narrates the life of the Kurdish Islamic scholar Said Nursi to question the politics of secularism in Turkey and to promote the Nur Movement, the influential

right-wing politico-religious movement founded by Nursi. *Tare Tar Akhtamar*, on the other hand, serves the affective reconstitution of Armenian history and creation of “postmemory.”¹³

Differences between our case studies and interpretative frameworks do not always yield an easy coalescence; they also harbor conflicts that are intrinsic to collaborative work. We recognize knowledge production as a performative process, meaning that research not only depicts but also does “something else.”¹⁴ A crucial element of these dynamics is the constitution of our subjectivities and careers as researchers. Understanding collaboration as a performative negotiation process also necessitates acknowledging “confusion, dissent or antagonism” as the core characteristics of the research environment.¹⁵ One of the most telling examples of the performative negotiation process is the established paradigms in the study of specific minoritarian and alternative theatre practices, our critical engagements with them, and the resulting ramifications on the reception of our work and therefore our careers.

Theatre practices by Turkey’s abjected minorities, such as Kurdish theatre, are often rightfully identified with anticolonial and counter-hegemonic struggles. Limiting the frame of analysis to decoloniality, however, has major shortcomings in terms of analyzing the significance of these productions within the broader sociopolitical dynamics in Turkey. Islamic theatre and cultural production, on the other hand, is a field where the operation of neoliberalism, Islamic conservatism, and authoritarian populism as well as their manifestations in hegemonic memory politics become visible. The researchers’ engagement with these subfields and their theoretical and methodological conventions initially led to conflict. Employing a collaborative perspective that values “confusion, dissent or antagonism” and each team member’s close engagement with the research conducted by their colleagues soon led to critical discussions about the conventions in each subfield, resulting in more elaborate analytical frameworks. Our work on Kurdish theatre thus ended up covering how productions in the 2000s not only served decolonial projects but, at times, also inadvertently participated in violent hegemonic memory projects. Since our research outputs are also subject to explicit and implicit forms of peer review, however, breaking with the scholarly conventions in liberal or progressive scholarship has also defined some of our performative self-making processes as researchers by professional risks.

Studying diverse yet connected case studies together enables us to develop a refined understanding of national abjection and provides insights into the political economy of contemporary Turkish theatre reacting to the pressures of a conservative neoliberal government. By collaboratively analyzing works that are almost entirely ignored in the theatre and performance studies scholarship on Turkey, we challenge the major trends and assumptions in the literature as well, including the definition of political theatre or the association of queer theatre with liberal or progressive political ends.¹⁶ Taking Turkey as a vantage point, *Staging National Abjection*

also asks critical questions of wider theoretical significance about the role theatre can play in regulating the politics of belonging in the nation-state, and about the relationship between artistic performance and the everyday performance of citizenship. The project thus aims to demonstrate the political tensions that define Turkey and its ever-growing diasporas, advance the scholarship on diasporic and refugee theatre in Europe, and provide insights into cultural politics in post-imperial settings and authoritarian populist regimes.

Due to the wide thematic and historical scope of *Staging National Abjection*, the project could only be realized through the collaboration of several researchers supported by three professional archivists, a specialized administrator, an ethics advisor, and an international advisory board. As of the fall of 2021, undergraduate student Mustafa Berk Alkoç; graduate students İlhan Çamiçi, Rüya Kalıntaş, and Ahmet Berkem Yanıkcan; as well as postdoctoral fellows Rivka Bihar Waldman and Şehnaz Şişmanoğlu Şimşek have also joined the research team. Currently, our plan is to recruit at least three more researchers at different levels. In order to share our resources with the minoritarian communities whose cultural productions we study, whenever possible, we prioritize recruiting researchers who study their own communities. This strategy also facilitates the recruitment of research participants and access to certain archives. While each researcher on the team, except the principal investigator, is primarily responsible for one case study, collaboration remains a guiding principle in our work. At our regular meetings, we share and discuss data and interpretative frameworks, review each other's academic work, and develop our plans regarding collaborative writing and editing. The project's planned outputs include co-edited special issues, both single-authored and co-authored articles, and collaboratively organized conferences, public lectures, webinars, and workshops. These diverse outputs are designed to foster new collaborations in and beyond the academia and theatre world.

The dossier edited by Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay and Şeyda Nur Yıldırım, "Ottoman and Turkish Theatre and Performance Historiography: Established Trends, New Approaches," forthcoming in the inaugural issue of *Theatre and Performance Notes and Counternotes*, exemplifies the collaborative nature of our work.¹⁷ The dossier features essays by Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay on queer theatre, İlyas Deniz Çınar on Jewish theatre, Murat Cankara—a member of our advisory board—on Armenian theatre, and Esra Dicle on the making of "Turkish theatre" as a category. The dossier treats historiographical practice as a performative endeavor and explores the intercultural and repetitive structures through which theatre/performance history and cultural history become mutually constitutive.¹⁸ Complementing and directly engaging with one another, these essays form a comprehensive study of the politics of theatre historiography on Turkey.

The multilingual nature of our project, combined with the politically sensitive topics that we study, poses important challenges where collaboration becomes a valuable resource on multiple levels. First, since the members of our research

team know different languages, collaborative research allows us to employ sources in multiple languages for each subproject. Second, the question of language is particularly complicated in Turkey, where the script reform of 1928 and the language reform that followed played a key role in the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the nation-state. Thus, several members of the research team conduct intralingual translation from Ottoman Turkish to contemporary Turkish. In these translations, lexical choice emerges as a practice imbued with performative power. Collaborative translation and editing practices not only prevent errors but also provide us with an opportunity to consider the political implications of lexical choices in existing translations as well as in our own.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a major obstacle to the vital requirement for successful collaborative research and scholarship: communication. While digital communication technologies have alleviated the absence of in-person interaction, the nature of our project would not allow for online meetings to be fully adequate for our purposes. Restricting our interaction to online meetings has undermined new collaboration opportunities as well as the socialization of the members of the research team with each other and within the academia. This is a potentially serious problem because collaboration and socialization foster the well-being of graduate students and junior faculty and facilitate their productivity—which, in our case, is more important for the researchers' long-term career prospects rather than the project's immediate goals.¹⁹

Under the conditions of the pandemic, to expand our collaborations with other scholars in and beyond Turkey, we organize webinars. In these online events, which all team members take turns to moderate, we are careful to feature the work of graduate students and postdoctoral researchers as well as established scholars. We make the recordings available on our YouTube channel.²⁰

Each researcher in the *Staging National Abjection* team employs ethnographic and archival methods according to their research needs. To ameliorate the setbacks the pandemic has brought on our collaborative research processes, we have prioritized archival research and postponed ethnographic research. Nevertheless, many archives have been closed or inaccessible due to the pandemic. The project's challenging archival research plan also requires collaboration with different stakeholders. We collaborate with three professional archivists as well as community organizations and individuals that maintain archives. Working with these amateur and independent archives helps us resist the hegemonic politics of historiography. As a temporary solution, we resorted to buying archival resources from secondhand booksellers online, utilizing digitized archives, and obtaining digitized resources through interlibrary loan with the help of our university library.

By their sixth month on the research team, the graduate student researchers have completed their first essays, received feedback from the principal investigator and fellow researchers, and submitted them to leading scholarly journals. They have now embarked on writing collaborative essays with the principal investigator. As

Darvin and Norton argue, collaborative writing can create a space where the student and supervisor can challenge assumptions of academic roles as well as the dominant norms in scholarly publishing and reconfigure power relations.²¹ While we do work toward these political and ethical goals in all aspects of our work, we are aware that our efforts are also limited by our habits formed within the structure of neoliberal academia, which sustains and promulgates the long-lasting Enlightenment legacy of individualism and quantification.²² With reference to Foucault, Yves Gendron argues that the strict performance measurement schemes in neoliberal academia confine researchers to “disciplinary and self-disciplinary” processes, which in turn result in “excessive performatization” and “superficiality” in academic labor.²³ While these schemes estimate the academic performance of each researcher separately through “‘hard’ data such as grants, citations and the number of publications,” multivocal projects that necessitate collaboration stand as “risky endeavor[s].”²⁴ In addition to such measurement schemes, collaborative research in contexts like Turkey has also remained limited as a consequence of infrastructural problems that limit access to funding and, in our field, theatre departments’ general tendency to focus on studio training at the expense of academic research.

As scholars who deromanticize collaborative research have noted, “collaboration-as-performativity” can reflect the expectations of academic life in the neoliberal world, strictly regulated by the number of publications and international impact measured in various ways.²⁵ The postmodern university is under the pressurizing gaze of performance management as the neoliberal academia anticipates a scholarly “performativity with exchange value.”²⁶ This pressure often results in manipulative relationships and exploitation of labor in academia. In our case, these likely downsides of collaboration are mitigated with the broader funding system and work plan behind the project that ensures the ethics of collaboration by making the work of every researcher visible.

The structure of *Staging National Abjection* creates a balance between individual contribution and collaborative team membership. Employing students not as research assistants but as researchers is a crucial first step serving this purpose. Under the scope of the project, the graduate student researchers write their master’s theses and doctoral dissertations, publish single-authored as well as co-authored articles, and edit special issues. The publications and scholarly activities of all team members are made equally visible through the project’s social media accounts.²⁷ Other resources, such as the travel budget, are also distributed equally among the team members, providing all researchers with the opportunity to present their work at international conferences. In our recruitment processes, all members of the research team serve on the search committee and have equal votes. We must note, however, that the principal investigator is still required to make sure the research team attains the promised level of productivity, and the junior researchers largely depend on him for their income and career prospects. Under these circumstances, any effort to transform power relations is bound to remain

limited, regardless of the intentions of the individuals or principles of the project. For such practices to become meaningful, it is crucial to work towards broader social and political transformation, ideally in collaboration with labor unions and other political organizations.

The impact of neoliberalism on the academia has been particularly harsh in Turkey, governed by a neoliberal, Sunni Islamist, and ultranationalist authoritarian regime.²⁸ In this context, *Staging National Abjection* occupies a tense position. On the one hand, the political nature of our work poses certain risks to members of our research team and our collaborators. In order to mitigate these risks, we take preplanned measures, especially in designing our public outreach efforts in Turkey and our talks and publications in Turkish. On the other hand, the prestige associated with the ERC grants, our project's planned outputs and employment opportunities, and the way our work enhances the performance of our university as well as national institutions in Turkey provides us with better working conditions. Nevertheless, we are still part of the Turkish academia, and we continue our collaborative work through constant negotiations in an oppressive and hostile political environment.

Acknowledgements

This article is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (ERC-2019-STG, STAGING-ABJECTION, Grant agreement ID: 852216). We would like to thank Kevin Brown, Felipe Cervera, Kyoko Iwaki, Eero Laine, and Kristof van Baarle, as well as the two anonymous reviewers, for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Notes

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