

“Listen to Us! Love Us!”

Issues of (Self-)Representation and the Asylum Seeker/Refugee Artists
of Fada Theatre’s *Talent on the Run*



Picture by Arie Kers

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Summary

In the Dutch field of theatre of the past several years a large number of performances have concerned themselves with the topic of asylum seekers and refugees. Some of these are verbatim theatre pieces that were initiated by non-asylum seekers/non-refugees. An exceptional verbatim theatre performance is *Talent on the Run* by Fada Theatre, which was initiated, directed, and performed by an all asylum seeker/refugee cast and crew. Having created a platform for themselves, the artists of Fada Theatre are approached regularly by people who wish to write about asylum seekers and refugees. They are held as representatives for the entire social minority. In this essay, I argue that being in such a position comes with issues of (self-)representation and that the work of artists from a minority background is inevitably affected by such issues when they address the majority.

To get an understanding of the position of Fada Theatre's artists, I turn to theory on 'discourse' and 'representation' and point to the structures of power and oppression that are inherent to issues of (self-)representation. I connect this to theory on identity and discuss how one can resist and/or negotiate the oppressive identities that have been constructed for them. Working upon the concepts of 'subalternity' and the 'burden of representation', I discuss restrictions and pressures someone from a social minority can experience when they attain a platform from which they can address the majority. I point out that these restrictions and pressures are a result of having persistently been misrepresented by people and institutions outside of the minority group.

To analyze my case study, I connect the above theory to the issues of (self-)representation that Fada Theatre's two founders/directors have experienced in creating and performing *Talent on the Run*. From my semi-structured interview with these artists, it became clear that they felt a responsibility to address the Dutch majority and to combat the discourse of Western news media that presents asylum seekers and refugees as bad and dangerous people. In doing so, they have had to make specific artistic choices and have had to adapt to the (literal and symbolic) languages that the Dutch audience can understand.

Lastly, I conduct a performance analysis of *Talent on the Run* to discuss its responds to the identified issues of (self-)representation. I show that the performance opposes the discourse of Western news media by reconfirming the discourse of humanitarian interventions that presents asylum seekers and refugees in an equally stereotypical manner, namely as helpless and needy victims. However, by structurally ending *Talent on the Run* with a Q&A-session in which the focus shifts to the people behind the performance, Fada Theatre is able to add to this discourse and to complicate the stereotype.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Summary	3
1) Introduction	5
2) Issues of (Self-)Representation in Theory	11
2.1 Discourse and Representation	11
2.2 Identity	17
2.3 Subalternity and the Burden of Representation	19
3) Issues of (Self-)Representation in the Practice of Fada Theatre	24
3.1 How It Began	24
3.2 Creating and performing <i>Talent on the Run</i>	27
4) Issues of (Self-)Representation Translated to <i>Talent on the Run</i>	31
4.1 The Play	31
4.1.1 Description	31
4.1.2 Analysis.....	33
4.2 The Q&A	35
4.2.1 Description	35
4.2.2 Analysis.....	35
5) Conclusion	38
5.1 Summary.....	38
5.2 Conclusion	41
5.3 Discussion	42
Bibliography.....	44
Appendix: Interview Questions	47

1) Introduction

In “To Witness Mimesis”, Caroline Wake takes note of a current trend within theatre of Anglophone countries; an undeniably large number of performances are concerned with asylum seekers.¹ By far most of these performances are of the subgenre she calls *verbatim theatre*.² It is a form of theatre in which the stories of actual people are taken as the basis of the performance. Even though the prefix suggests that these stories are recorded and retold in their exact same wordings, many theatre makers take artistic freedom in the staging and do not always work from recorded material, but rather from indirectly reported or remembered speech. At times, these stories are performed by trained actors who have no personal background connecting them to the tales. At other times, persons who do have a personal connection are invited to take the stage and sometimes perform their own stories.³

While Wake acknowledges that her scope is limited to Anglophone theatre, she imagines there to be similar trends in theatre of other languages and countries.⁴ Looking at the field of theatre in the Netherlands of the past several years, she appears to assume rightly so; here as well a large number of performances concerned themselves with the topic of asylum seekers and refugees.⁵ Some (not most) of these performances can be specifically labeled as verbatim theatre.⁶ One such a

¹ Caroline Wake, “To Witness Mimesis: The Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics of Testimonial Theatre in *Through the Wire*,” *Modern Drama* 56.1 (2013): 102.

² To list a few of Wake’s examples: *Chasing Shadow* by Heather Lash (2002, Canada); *Through the Wire* by Ros Horin (2004, Australia); *Visible* by Cardboard Citizens (2006, England); *Asylum Dialogues* by Ice and Fire (2008 England); *Aftermath* by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen (2009, United States); *Do We Look Like Refugees?!* by Alecky Blythe (2010, Scotland).

Wake, 102-104.

³ Tom Cantrell, “Verbatim Theatre,” accessed March 19, 2017, <http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/genres/verbatim-theatre-iid-2551>.

⁴ Wake, 104.

⁵ Some examples are: *No Man’s Land* by Dries Verhoeven (2008); *Comfort Zone* by Via Belin, Orkater and Ragazze Quartet (2015); *Schipper, mag ik overvaren?* by AFGEFACKT and AbART (2015); *La Isla Bonita* by Rudolphi Producties (2015); *Marieke Marieke* by Het Zuidelijk Toneel (2015); *Fit to Fly* by Casper Vandeputte/Het Nationale Toneel (2016).

⁶ Such as:

- *As I left My Father’s House* by New Dutch Connections, which premiered in 2009 and still saw the stage in 2016. In the performance true stories of fleeing are combined with stories from the Bible, the Koran, and the Tenach. The stories are performed by professional actors of whom many have a migrational background, some specifically one of refuge.
- *Nobody Home* by Daria Bukvič, Saman Amini, Majd Mardo, and Vanja Rukavina (2015). In the performance the theatre makers reflect on their personal pasts as children fleeing to the Netherlands.
- *Thuis in Hoogeveen* (At Home in Hoogeveen), which is an integration project instigated by Loods13 and the municipality of Hoogeveen. In this project, twenty refugees were guided to stage their stories. The first performances in 2016 completely sold out, encouraging Loods13 and the municipality to schedule several more stagings.
- *Nieuwe familie* (New Family) by Sanne Vogel/Bos Theaterproducties (2017). In this performance Vogel takes

piece is Fada Theatre's *Talent on the Run*. It is a unique piece, as the initiative for it was taken not by non-asylum seeker/non-refugee theatre makers or directors of applied theatre projects (as is typically the case), but by two asylum seekers (now refugees) themselves: Ahmad Al Herafi and Ramez Basheer. Al Herafi and Basheer met as theatre students in Syria, became close friends and later successful, award-winning actors. With the war pushing them from their homes, the two fled together to the Netherlands and ended up in the asylum seekers centre of Alphen aan den Rijn. During their stay in this facility, which is in fact a former prison, they had to deal with several disheartening incidents. One of these was the suicide of a fellow resident. This led the actors to create a theatre performance; they felt that their stories and those of their fellow asylum seekers needed an outlet, needed to be told and needed to be heard. After holding auditions in the centre, Al Herafi and Basheer gathered a group of Syrians, who would together perform true stories of exile. Some of the actors would perform stories of friends and family, others their very own recent histories. The performance premiered in early 2016 in the asylum seekers centre of Alphen aan den Rijn. Later, with the help of Dutch volunteers, the group started touring the Netherlands. Thus, Fada Theatre was born and became a great success. Currently *Talent on the Run* has been performed over seventy-five times.

I had the chance to see Fada Theatre perform at four different occasions: at ZIMIHC Theater Stefanus (March 10, 2017), at the Dominicus Church of Amsterdam (March 24, 2017), at the International Community Arts Festival (March 29, 2017), and at Bijlmer Parktheater (June 11, 2017). After most of the performances, the audience was invited to have a chat with members of the cast and crew. I had the pleasure of speaking with some of Fada Theatre's artists as well as with Nancy Ubert, one of the group's Dutch volunteers, their chairwoman and beloved "mother" of the familial cast and crew. In my first encounter with Ubert, I asked her about the possibilities of researching *Talent on the Run* and specifically about interviewing members of Fada Theatre. While I had spoken to Al Herafi earlier, who had responded affirmatively, Ubert seemed much more hesitant. She told me that Fada Theatre is approached on a regular basis by people wanting to write "some nice story" about asylum seekers/refugees in the Netherlands and having simply Googled the terms "refugees" and "theatre", which had led them to the group. In response and out of fear that I might not be able to carry out my research as planned, I defended myself saying this was not at all my intention and that I was much more interested in "the difficulties" the group encountered. Yet, looking back, Ubert had really opened my eyes. Her hesitations made clear to me that the artists are so often approached (and to my alarm, by myself as well), not necessarily because of their artistry, but because they are asylum

the stage with two Syrian refugees, who stayed at Vogel's home when their right to refuge was being assessed. The three share their stories of this time together.

seekers/refugees who are easily approachable, because of the platform they have created for themselves; asylum seekers/refugees who, to 'Us', represent an entire, heavily debated, social group; asylum seekers/refugees who supposedly can represent all their fellow asylum seekers and refugees, regardless of their widely varying backgrounds and stories. As a result, my encounter with Ubert led me to re-evaluate my research plans and directed my attention to the experiences of Fada Theatre's artists. How would being in such a position of representing an entire minority group affect them? Would this have affected the ways in which they presented themselves to their public? Both in the play and beyond it?

Previous studies on verbatim theatre in which vulnerable minorities perform their own stories have focused on questions of ethics in projects instigated by persons outside of the staged minority group. Two especially notable scholars in this field are Julie Salverson and Alison Jeffers. Julie Salverson has been active as a "cultural animator" and playwright in verbatim theatre since the 1980s.⁷ Wake identifies Salverson's production *Are the Birds in Canada the Same?*, which she made with a group of refugees in 1993, as "one of the earliest recorded examples of the genre."⁸ Salverson "has since published several articles on this experience [that together] are the foundation for the discourse on this type of work."⁹ In her articles, Salverson has discussed topics such as the risk of re-traumatization,¹⁰ the re-inscription of victimhood,¹¹ and the transformation of injury into spectacle.¹²

Jeffers has joined the discussion later on, making valuable additions by contextualizing projects of verbatim theatre; she has placed the projects in relation to the different intentionalities of theatre makers¹³ and in relation to the bureaucratic process of applying for asylum.¹⁴ Jeffers was also one of the first scholars to approach verbatim theatre from the perspective of spectatorship, questioning the ethics of being an audience at these 'spectacles'.¹⁵

Both Salverson and Jeffers point to the degree of power and ownership of a performing

⁷ Julie Salverson, "The Art of Witness in Popular Theatre," *Canadian Theatre Review* 90 (1997): 36.

⁸ Wake, 103.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Salverson, "The Art of Witness."

Salverson, "Performing emergency: Witnessing, popular theatre, and the lie of the literal," *Theatre Topics* 6.2 (1996): 181-191.

¹¹ Salverson, "Transgressive Storytelling or an Aesthetic of Injury: Performance, Pedagogy and Ethics." *Theatre Research in Canada/Recherches Théâtrales au Canada* 20.1 (1999).

Salverson, "Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Inquiry," *Theater* 31.3 (2001): 119-125.

¹² Salverson, "The Art of Witness."

Salverson, "Transgressive Storytelling."

¹³ Alison Jeffers, "Refugee Perspectives: The Practice and Ethics of Verbatim Theatre and Refugee Stories," *Platform* 1.1 (2006): 1-17.

¹⁴ Jeffers, "Dirty Truth: Personal Narrative, Victimhood and Participatory Theatre Work with People Seeking Asylum," *Research in Drama Education* 13.2 (2008): 217-221.

¹⁵ Jeffers, "Hospitable Stages and Civil Listening: Being an Audience for Participatory Refugee Theatre," *Refugee Performance: Practical Encounters* (2013): 297-310.

minority group in the process of creating a verbatim theatre piece as key in questions of ethics.¹⁶ Salverson states that participants need a representation that not simply makes them re-live their past on stage, “but also [allows them] to choose what [they] will express of it to others.”¹⁷ This suggests that a case such as *Talent on the Run*, in which the asylum seekers/refugees had full ownership over the creative process, would be one of the more unproblematic forms of verbatim theatre, ethically speaking. However, as my encounter with Ubert had made clear, even in such a case there can be challenges with regard to representation.

Kobena Mercer has referred to representational issues in which only a few members of a minority group are cast as spokespersons for that entire community as the *burden of representation*.¹⁸ In his influential article “Black Art and the Burden of Representation,” Mercer discusses an exhibition, *The Other Story* (Hayward Gallery, 1989), which could be seen as a “moment of corrective inclusion to counteract the historical exclusion of black artists.”¹⁹ According to him, the exhibition “had to carry an impossible burden of representation in the sense that a single exhibition had to ‘stand for’ the totality of everything that could fall within the category of black art.”²⁰ Later studies building on Mercer’s conceptualization of the burden of representation have mainly focused on racial minorities as well,²¹ sometimes in intersection with gender.²² Other studies focused on religious minorities (mainly Islam) or sexuality.²³ However, the burden of representation has not yet

¹⁶ Salverson, ““Playing with Tension”: What “Voice” Does Popular Theatre Speak?,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 78 (1994): 4-7.

Jeffers, “Refugee Perspectives.”

¹⁷ Salverson, “Playing with Tension,” 7.

¹⁸ Kobena Mercer, “Black Art and the Burden of Representation,” *Third Text* 4.10 (1990): 61-78.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Examples are:

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, “Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle over Representation,” in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 178-219.

Jeremy D. Stoddard and Alan S. Marcus - “The Burden of Historical Representation: Race, Freedom, and “Educational” Hollywood Film,” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, no. 36.1 (Fall 2006): 26-35.

Nahem Yousaf, “Hanif Kureishi and ‘the brown man’s burden’,” *Critical Survey* 8, no. 1 (1996): 14-25.

Ameena Ghaffer-Kucher, “Writing Culture; Inscribing Lives: A Reflective Treatise on the Burden of Representation in Native Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 28, no. 10 (2015): 1186-1202.

Shoba S. Rajgopal, “The Politics of Location: Ethnic Identity and Cultural Conflict in the Cinema of the South Asian Diaspora,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (January 2003): 49-66.

²² Such as:

Josephine A. Beoku-Betts, “African Women Pursuing Graduate Studies in the Sciences: Racism, Gender Bias, and Third World Marginality,” *NWSA Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 116-135.

Janice McCabe, “Racial and Gender Microaggressions on a Predominantly-White Campus: Experiences of Black, Latina/o and White Undergraduates,” *Race, Gender & Class* 16, no.1-2 (2009): 133-151.

²³ See:

Marta Bolognani, “Islam, Ethnography and Politics: Methodological Issues in Researching amongst West Yorkshire Pakistanis in 2005,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 10, no. 4 (October 2007): 279-293.

been studied in relation to asylum seekers and refugees.

The lacunas in the current research on verbatim theatre and in the research on the burden of representation, combined with my contemplations I have described above, have led me to formulate the following research question:

How can the ways in which Fada Theatre presents itself in Talent on the Run be understood in relation to issues of (self-)representation?

This central question will be divided into three sub-questions:

- 1) *How have issues of (self-)representation of a social minority been theorized?*
- 2) *How have issues of (self-)representation taken shape in the context of creating and performing Talent on the Run?*
- 3) *How does Talent on the Run respond to the identified issues of (self-)representation?*

To answer the first sub-question, in chapter two I will build upon the work of Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Song Hwee Lim, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on 'discourse' and 'representation'. They allow me to specifically address the structures of power and oppression inherent to issues of (self-)representation. The impact of discourses and representations on social minorities will further be discussed in relation to identity. Working upon Foucault, I will discuss how one imagines the 'Self' through discourse and what this can mean for a social minority. Hall helps to understand how people can resist and/or negotiate identity. Secondly, I will discuss restrictions and pressures someone from a social minority can experience when they find a rare platform from which they can address the majority. The work of Spivak on 'subalternity' will allow me to address the restrictions in voice, when a minority can only be understood through the discourses shaped and maintained by the majority. Mercer's discussion of the 'burden of representation' gives insight into the pressures experienced by artists that come to represent a minority. Lastly, bell hooks' work allows me to add nuance, discussing differences for marginalized people in addressing the 'Margin' or the 'Centre'. Throughout my discussion, I will link the theory on (self-)representation to studies on asylum seekers and refugees in order to get an understanding of how the issues could affect them specifically.

Claire Dwyer, "Contested Identities: Challenging Dominant Representations of Young British Muslim Women," in *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Culture*, ed. Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 50-65.

A. B. Christa Schwarz, "Writing in the Harlem Renaissance: The Burden of Representation and Sexual Dissidence," in *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 25-47.

In the second part of my research (chapter three), I will focus on how the identified issues of (self-)representation translate to the practice of Fada Theatre. I will conduct a semi-structured interview with Al Herafi and Basheer, giving insight into their specific experiences. The questions will be informed by my findings from the first sub-question. However, I will leave space for the two artists to bring up topics themselves and to discuss experiences that might not have come forward from the consulted theory.

To answer my third sub-question (chapter four), I will conduct a performance analysis of *Talent on the Run*. This will allow me to see how the performance responds to the identified issues of (self-)representation, be it through conscious or subconscious artistic decisions made by Al Herafi and Basheer. In my analysis, the Q&A-session with which Fada Theatre routinely ends *Talent on the Run* will be treated as part of the performance. After all, here the company performatively presents itself as well, possibly in response to issues of (self-)representation.

With this research, I hope to offer insight into issues of (self-)representation as well as into the ways such issues can translate to the work of an artist of a minority background, both in general and pertaining to asylum seekers and refugees in Western society specifically. I hope to show that, even in a case wherein members of a minority group have full ownership over an artistic process and end product/verbatim theatre performance, they are still not fully free in choosing what to share of their stories or (for that same matter) in what ways; they need to concern themselves with the languages of the majority and the structures that keep them oppressed.

2) Issues of (Self-)Representation in Theory

Central to this chapter is the question: how have issues of (self-)representation of social minorities been theorized? Firstly, I will discuss the concept of 'discourse' and 'representation'. I will do so building on the work of Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Song Hwee Lim and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, which allows me to specifically address the structures of power and oppression inherent to issues of (self-)representation. Additionally, the work of Olga Guedes Bailey and Ramaswami Harindranath, Prem Kumar Rajaram, and Liisa H. Malkki will offer insight into the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees have been represented in dominant discourses.

The impact of dominant discourses and representations on social minorities will be further discussed in relation to identity. Working upon Foucault, I will discuss how one imagines the 'Self' through discourse and what this can mean for a social minority. Hall helps to understand how people can resist and/or negotiate identity. In her analysis, Marie Lacroix turns to the construction of 'refugeeness' and how asylum seekers resist and negotiate this identity in the ways they present themselves.

Lastly, I will discuss restrictions and pressures someone from a social minority can experience when they attain a platform from which to address the majority. The work of Spivak on 'subalternity' will allow me to address the restrictions in language and voice, when a minority can only be understood through the discourses shaped and maintained by the majority. Kobena Mercer's discussion of the 'burden of representation' gives insight into the pressures experienced by artists that come to represent a minority. bell hooks' work allows me to add further nuance, discussing differences for marginalized people in addressing either the 'Margin' or the 'Centre'.

2.1 Discourse and Representation

The notion of *discourse* has been most prominently defined by Michel Foucault. In *Orders of Discourse*, Foucault describes 'discourse' as a collection of statements that in a given society represents knowledge and conditions how things can be understood and talked about.²⁴ Yet, to quote Richard Terdiman, "no discourse is ever a monologue."²⁵ In every society different discourses exist next to each other, with some discourses being more dominant than others. These dominant discourses produce a greater power, which in turn is capable of reinforcing dominant discourses. So-

²⁴ Michel Foucault, "Orders of Discourse," *Social Science Information* 10, no. 2 (April 1971): 7-30.

²⁵ Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 36.

called *counter-discourses* contest power, implying that power is never fixed.²⁶ Nor is power necessarily visibly or consciously enacted. As Foucault states in *Discipline and Punish*, the “perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary,”²⁷ since people believe in, cooperate with and internalize certain forces of control.²⁸ Writing on *hegemony*, Antonio Gramsci points towards dominant ideologies coming to be seen as common sense and natural through a continuous reconfirmation.²⁹ Similarly, dominant discourses that are continuously reconfirmed by forces of power (that are continuously reconfirmed by dominant discourses), can also come to be seen as a given, as common sense and as the undisputable truth. As such, discourses have real consequences for how “reality” is perceived and provide that certain things are seen as “the way they are supposed to be,” as what is natural.

One discursive force that is capable of conditioning what is seen as truth and reality is referred to as *representation*. In “New Ethnicities,” Stuart Hall identifies two usages of this term. The first usage he describes as “a mimetic theory of representation,” in which representation is understood as the depiction of a tangible reality that exists “outside”.³⁰ In the second usage, representation is seen as not merely reflexive of that “outside”, but also as formative; a representation not only re-presents something or someone already in existence, but also brings that something or someone *into* existence, drawing on but also shaping discourses.³¹ Working upon this last definition, Song Hwee Lim speaks of the *act* of representing, pointing attention to the force behind the representation and the audience perceiving it. Lim, as such, refers to representation as *per-formative*.³² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, moreover, directs the attention to a difference between representation in a political sense, which she refers to as *Vertretung*, and representation as signification, or *Darstellung*. Spivak conceptualizes ‘Vertretung’ as a substituting, in which someone stands in and speaks for somebody or something else.³³ With ‘Darstellung’ she refers to re-presentation and draws attention to *how* something or someone is portrayed.³⁴ Hall employs a similar distinction, yet puts a greater emphasis on the power dynamics of representation using the

²⁶ Ibid., 65.

²⁷ Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 201.

²⁸ Ibid., 135-169.

²⁹ Antonio Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” in *Contemporary Sociological Thought: Themes and Theories*, ed. Sean P. Hier (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2005), 54.

³⁰ Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 444.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Song Hwee Lim, *Celluloid Comrades: Representation of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 43-44.

³³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 108.

³⁴ Ibid.

terms *access* and *contestation*; only certain people or institutions have access to the rights of representation (*Vertretung*) and would thus be capable of contesting prominent discourses (*Darstellung*).³⁵ What I take from these different yet complementary definitions is a conception of representation in which someone has the power to do the representing, in a certain way, and for a certain audience, which can have an impact on discourse and thus influences how things, the “outside” that is represented, can be seen and understood.

In “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” Hall offers a closer look at the dynamics of the *representation of difference*, in which people are portrayed who are “in any way significantly different from the majority: ‘Them’ rather than ‘Us’.”³⁶ Drawing on linguistics, anthropology and psychoanalysis, Hall shows that the construction of difference can be both positive and negative. On the positive side, difference helps us to classify things and is essential to the construction of meaning: we only know what is black because of its contrast to white.³⁷ Furthermore, because we can see someone as ‘Other’ we can also come to constitute the ‘Self’.³⁸ Thus, difference contributes to a sense of identity. On the negative side, difference can be a site of splitting, of negative feelings and of hostility towards the ‘Other’. For one, classification and the construction of meaning through sets of difference, or *binary oppositions*, is considerably rudimentary and reductionist.³⁹ Pertaining to the unwritten rules and codes of a culture, order can thus be easily disturbed when things or people do not fall within the set categories (I think of hostility towards immigrants, people who are classified as ‘Other’ and as belonging ‘There’, who are now ‘Here’ among ‘Us’).⁴⁰ Moreover, as Hall points out in reference to the work of Jacques Derrida, binary oppositions are hardly ever neutral. Each set usually has one dominant pole that has more power, for example: ‘white’ over ‘black’, ‘men’ over ‘women’, ‘native’ over ‘immigrant’.⁴¹

According to Hall “power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group,” against the ‘Other’ on the opposite side of the binary.⁴² In order to fashion society after a certain view on normalcy, those who fall out of place need to be controlled.⁴³ As a way for hegemonic forces to maintain social and symbolic order, minorities are often represented as *stereotypes*, which “sets up a symbolic order between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’ [...], what belongs and what does not

³⁵ Hall, “New Ethnicities,” 443.

³⁶ Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other,” in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, ed. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor and Simeon J. Yates (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 229.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 259.

[...], between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them."⁴⁴ Members of society are usually assigned to *types*, to the membership of certain groups, which helps to classify and construct meaning and thus make sense of the world around us.⁴⁵ However, when people are stereotyped, they are reduced to only a few identity markers, which are represented as essential and fixed by nature.⁴⁶ These characteristics do not have to be necessarily "bad", yet a stereotype is always negative as it denies a group from being imagined as heterogeneous and its members as complex human beings. As an example of this, Hall refers to the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which author Harriet Beecher Stowe made an attempt to counter stereotypes of black people and advocate against slavery. To counter the stereotyping of black people as uncivilized and aggressive, Stowe emphasized a gentle nature and childlike simplicity supposedly inherent to black people.⁴⁷ "This sentiment counters one set of stereotypes (their savagery) by substituting another (their eternal goodness)."⁴⁸ Even though this modified the ways in which black people could be imag(in)ed, "a sentimentalized version of the stereotyping remained active" and black people were still only reduced to a few characteristics, instead of being represented as heterogeneous and complex human beings.⁴⁹

In "Racialized 'Othering'," Olga Guedes Bailey and Ramaswami Harindranath discuss patterns in a form of representing difference that is of particular interest here, namely the representation of asylum seekers and refugees.⁵⁰ Focusing on Western news media of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, they state that depictions "reach back to colonial representations of non-Western populations as duplicitous and dangerous to Western values."⁵¹ Similarly, asylum seekers and refugees in our time are consistently referred to as 'undesirable', 'problem', 'bogus' and 'illegal', constituting an attitude towards these social groups and invoking separatist discourses that distinguish between an 'Us' within the nation-state and a homogeneous 'Them', the 'foreigners'.⁵² This way of representing would be so persistent, that the labels 'asylum seeker' and 'refugee' now carry negative connotations, instead of simply referring to a specific type of migrant.

In their own analysis of the representation of asylum seekers and refugees in news programs of the BBC and Channel Four, Bailey and Harindranath found that news about asylum seekers and

⁴⁴ Ibid., 258.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 257.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 249.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 249-250.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 250.

⁵⁰ Olga Guedes Bailey and Ramaswami Harindranath, "Racialized 'Othering': The Representation of Asylum Seekers in News Media," in *Journalism: Critical Issues*, ed. Stuart Allan (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2005), 274-286.

⁵¹ Ibid., 277.

⁵² Ibid., 274-276.

refugees is often limited to a few events, namely:

“social problems (housing, employment, welfare); political opinions (politicians commenting on new policies or suggesting solutions); government policy (new laws restricting asylum seekers’ access); cultural difference (mostly in terms of deviance and criminality); public perception (in general based on misconceptions of welfare support for asylum seekers and refugees) and incidents of violence.”⁵³

Interestingly, they found an absence of reports directly engaging with asylum seekers and refugees themselves or presenting their experiences.⁵⁴ This would only contribute to the distorted depiction and homogenization of asylum seekers and refugees; “rather than be presented as people who are trying to escape threat, they are, in most cases, represented as *the* threat,” providing a rationale for distrust and exclusion.⁵⁵ Bailey and Harindranath point out that members of the public usually have little direct contact with asylum seekers and refugees, meaning that the depictions are a strong force shaping dominant public discourses and greatly influencing people’s perceptions of these social groups.⁵⁶

Since in any given society different discourses exist next to each other, these negative discourses on asylum seekers and refugees are also contested. One prominent force in shaping a counter discourse is humanitarian institutions that aim to generate support for their causes to help asylum seekers and refugees. In “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee” Prem Kumar Rajaram analyzes the representation of asylum seekers and refugees by Oxfam GB.⁵⁷ Surprisingly, just like Bailey and Harindranath, he found a lack of direct engagement with the minority groups.⁵⁸ Another striking similarity he discovered was the absence of context; according to Rajaram, a de-politicized and de-historicized image of asylum seekers and refugees is constructed, in which the people are reduced to mute bodies, struck by loss and helplessness.⁵⁹

In “Speechless Emissaries,” Liisa H. Malkki has drawn complementary conclusions in her discussion of the “global visual field of often quite standardized representational practices” of humanitarian interventions depicting asylum seekers and refugees.⁶⁰ Malkki argues that a universal

⁵³ Ibid., 280.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 283.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 282-283.

⁵⁷ Prem Kumar Rajaram, “Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 3 (September 2002): 247-264.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 247.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Liisa H. Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization,” *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (August 1996): 386.

subject is constructed in an attempt to generate support ('They' are like 'Us' after all), in which "refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general: universal man, universal woman, universal child and, taken together, universal family."⁶¹ Typically, this is done using one of two visual conventions. In the first, asylum seekers and refugees are depicted as a silent mass, emphasizing the extent of the issue whilst denying personal specificities (names, backgrounds, opinions, hopes, fears), suggesting "an utter human uniformity."⁶² In the second, a similar "anonymous corporeality" is constructed, in which one or a few sentimentalized figures are singled out.⁶³ These figures are usually women and children, who are more commonly associated with helplessness and innocence and would, thus, depict a greater need for protection.⁶⁴ As Malkki quotes Barry Stein, "refugees are helped because they are helpless; they must display their need and helplessness."⁶⁵ Interestingly, in working to amplify the humanity of asylum seekers and refugees, the insistence on homogeneousness simultaneously dehumanizes them, disallowing any individuality or elements that would complicate the images of pure victimhood.⁶⁶

What I take from the above is that asylum seekers and refugees are predominantly represented as either criminals, a threat and a problem (as seen in Bailey and Harindranath's discussion of Western news media), or as an amorphous mass of helpless and troubled victims (as seen in Rajaram's and Malkki's discussion of humanitarian interventions). I equate this binary pattern to what Hall observed in the representation of black people by Stowe; here as well, one set of stereotypes is contested by a set of opposites, keeping a reductionist and homogeneous picture in place. What is more, the experiences of actual asylum seekers and refugees are not included. The groups are exclusively represented by Western self-appointed representatives ('Vertreter') that have the power to perform the act of representation. As argued above, representations are also meant for an audience. As such, I want to add that Western news media specifically intent to inform certain Western publics and humanitarian agencies intent on generating support from these same peoples, trying to recruit the 'Us' to help 'Them'. As Bailey and Harindranath pointed out, these audiences usually do not have any direct contact with asylum seekers and refugees, meaning that the representations greatly impact the ways in which these minority groups can be imagined by them/'Us'; they greatly impact the dominant discourses and what is seen as the truth about how asylum seekers and refugees really are.

⁶¹ Ibid., 378.

⁶² Ibid., 387.

⁶³ Ibid., 388.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 389-390.

2.2 Identity

Above, I discussed how discourses shape the ways members of a society can understand the world, shape what is seen as naturally so and as true. Representation has been pointed out as a force shaping and re-affirming discourses. It became clear that in the representation of difference distinctions are constructed, often in the shape of binary oppositions. This would help us to classify things and people and, in the process, make sense of them. In the discussion of stereotyping, I briefly touched upon the assignment of people to types. We categorize people, for example, as friends or strangers, adults or children, wealthy or poor. In the case of stereotyping, we are incapable of imagining members of certain groups (read: minorities) heterogeneously and complexly and reduce them to only a few characteristics that are seen as essential and fixed by nature ('They' are childlike in essence; 'They' are naturally poor). Lim states that people "may be embraced or discriminated against [...] on the basis of these representations, with consequences affecting their social status and social relations."⁶⁷ This draws attention to how the ways in which we classify people can have a real impact, not just on how we see or imagine them, but also on how we approach and treat 'Others'.

The classification of people does not only help us to make sense of the others around us, it also helps us to make sense of the 'Self'. As has been pointed out, we can come to constitute the 'Self', because we can see certain people as 'Other': I know I am white, because I am not black; I know I am woman, because I am not man. Thus, one constructs the 'Self' working upon sets of difference. Foucault points out that a person's identity is then also not something one is in essence, fixed and unchanging through time and space, nor is it tied to a natural membership of a group. Identity is, however, a way of imagining the 'Self' through discourse.⁶⁸

Hall argues that people are not mere objects of discourse; they are not simply summoned into place without having any agency themselves and possibilities to resist or negotiate. To illustrate this, Hall draws attention to the existence of multiple discourses within one society that all have the potential to construct one's identity in diverging and antagonistic ways (for example: wearing the hijab can be seen as modesty, as oppression, or as rejection of the male gaze).⁶⁹ This would mean that, on the one hand, identities are never unified, but always fragmented and fractured. On the other hand, it would mean that identities are constantly in the process of change, since over time certain discourses find greater dominance over others.⁷⁰ Moreover, individuals would not simply

⁶⁷ Lim, 44-45.

⁶⁸ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

⁶⁹ Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity'?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 1996), 4.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

ping-pong between different discourses that give them a certain identity; they would also invest in “the narrativation of the self.”⁷¹ A person can choose to (temporarily) attach to certain positions into which they are interpellated by specific discourses and invest in these positions. “That suturing [of the individual to a position] has to be thought of as an *articulation*, rather than a one-sided process,” Hall states.⁷²

In my previous discussion of discourse and representation, I reviewed two dominant ways of representing asylum seekers and refugees. One way is predominant in Western news media, in which asylum seekers and refugees are often presented as a great threat. The other way is predominant in humanitarian interventions, in which asylum seekers and refugees are positioned as victims, helpless and troubled. Both forms of representation have been pointed out as problematic, as they reduce asylum seekers and refugees to certain stereotypes and suggest homogeneity. Connecting these patterns of representation to the above theory on identity, I wonder how asylum seekers and refugees are affected by the identities newly given to them by dominant discourses and in what ways they resist and/or negotiate them.

In “The Road to Asylum,” Marie Lacroix delves further into the social construction of asylum seeker identity. The focus of her study is on asylum seekers in Canada, yet she argues that that which is specific to the experience of being an asylum seeker crosses borders, since all asylum seekers are separated from their pre-migratory life, their previous status and identity.⁷³ What Lacroix calls *refugeeness* is then typified by loss. They no longer find official recognition of their professional competencies, they are unable to work or study in their fields of expertise, and are commonly cut off from their families, “their identities as husbands, fathers, mothers, sisters, and wives.”⁷⁴ Asylum seekers have become ‘Other’, not just to those around them in their host countries, but also to themselves.⁷⁵

Lacroix notes that asylum seekers have invested in the refugee identity by leaving their countries in search of asylum. However, the choice of leaving cannot be seen as ultimately free since in many cases it is a matter of life or death.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Lacroix states that there is a duality in the asylum seeker identity, in which one part was “chosen” and another part imposed. That which was “chosen” is the identity of someone fleeing conflict. That which was imposed was the reduction to

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 6.

⁷³ Marie Lacroix, “The Road to Asylum. Between Fortress Europe and Canadian Refugee Policy: The Social Construction of the Refugee Claimant Subjectivity” (PhD diss., McGill University, 2000), 9.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 149.

only this identity by state policy in their host countries, in which an asylum seeker's life is put on hold, where they are without a job and without family while their right to refuge is being assessed.⁷⁷

Asylum seekers would resist and negotiate this imposed refugeeness by using strategies that help to maintain their previous cultural identity and help to avoid further psychological trauma.⁷⁸ In her interviews, Lacroix noticed that many respondents would refer to themselves in their past subjectivities.⁷⁹ "I was a doctor, I had status," as one respondent would say.⁸⁰ According to Lacroix "there is a dominant will [...] to work towards reclaiming their previous subjectivities [and] towards recapturing their past worth."⁸¹ Furthermore, she noticed a deep felt need in her respondents to talk about the political situations that led them to become asylum seekers. Explaining would be a way of trying to find meaning in their experiences, in their loss of previous subjectivity and their new identities as asylum seekers.⁸²

Lacroix's study shows how asylum seekers resist and negotiate their loss and their newly imposed, reductionary identity by presenting themselves in certain ways: by amplifying their past subjectivities and explaining why they "chose" refugeeness in the first place. Lacroix only considers the impact of state policy by which an asylum seeker's life is put on hold. However, as became clear earlier, asylum seekers and refugees are also reduced to a certain kind of refugeeness in news media and humanitarian interventions. Would they resist and negotiate these imposed identities in the same ways? Do these dominant representations similarly impact the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees present themselves?

2.3 Subalternity and the Burden of Representation

As became clear in the discussion of the representation of asylum seekers and refugees in Western news media and in humanitarian interventions, on the part of those who speak about and/or for them there is a lack of direct engagement with the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees. They are continuously represented by others who claim the power to perform the act of representation, whilst their own voices remain unheard. This has led Harindranath to link the asylum seeker and refugee experience to the concept of *subalternity* in his article "Refugee Experience, Subalternity,

⁷⁷ Ibid., 150.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 151.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 157.

⁸¹ Ibid., 152.

⁸² Ibid., 158-159.

and the Politics of Representation.”⁸³

As David Ludden points out in his overview of the (academic) history of ‘subalternity’, this is a term with a long past: in late-medieval English, ‘subaltern’ denoted vassals and peasants, by 1700 it applied to lower military ranks (hinting at peasant backgrounds of the servicemen) and by 1800, writing from a “subaltern perspective” was introduced in novels and histories written about military campaigns in India and America.⁸⁴ After the Russian Revolution, the word evolved into an academic concept, with Gramsci applying notions of subaltern identity to theories of class struggle; ‘subaltern’ came to stand for the working class.⁸⁵ A split followed in historical studies, in which *subaltern studies* pointed attention towards peoples whose histories had been previously neglected.⁸⁶ Many scholars within subaltern studies deployed the ideas of Gramsci, yet ‘subalternity’ was invented anew, most exemplary in the work of Ranajit Guha, who entirely divorced it from Gramsci’s thoughts to invent a specifically *Indian* subalternity.⁸⁷ Guha argued that, before subaltern studies, colonialism and colonial discourse was the main force that produced historical writing about India.⁸⁸ This line of thought became even more prominent in 1985, when in the collection of essays called *Subaltern Studies IV* the perspectives of Bernard S. Cohn and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak were introduced. Cohn and Spivak both explored “the language and textuality of discursive power.”⁸⁹ With their contributions subaltern studies attained a more communal direction, focusing on colonial constructions of culture and power, on expressions of difference in discourse and representation that caused identities to remain hidden and mentalities to be misunderstood. However, ‘Subalternity’ as a term remained fluid.⁹⁰

In discussing asylum seekers and refugees, Harindranath works upon Spivak’s notion of subalternity.⁹¹ Spivak is most renowned for her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in which she questions the enunciative power of the (Indian, female) subaltern.⁹² According to her, the subaltern cannot speak, because they are stuck between dominant discourses: those of the colonists or “first-world intellectuals” and those of the native elite classes within the decolonised nation.⁹³ This means

⁸³ Ramaswami Harindranath, “Refugee Experience, Subalternity, and the Politics of Representation,” *ANZCA* (August 2010): 1-8. <http://www.anzca.net/documents/2007-conf-papers/161-refugee-experience-subalternity-and-the-politics-of-representation-1/file.html>.

⁸⁴ David Ludden, *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), 4.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 15, 17.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18, 20.

⁹¹ Harindranath.

⁹² Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66-111.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 102.

that it is impossible for the subaltern to make themselves heard in their own subaltern voice, since they are only read and understood by the majority/'Us' through the dominant discourses.⁹⁴ Spivak is then also critical of western intellectuals. She states that they can never truly know the subaltern, can never really speak for them, and should therefore stop "masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves."⁹⁵

While Spivak is mainly concerned with the production of academic knowledge, Harindranath adapts her notion of subalternity to the representation of asylum seekers and refugees in journalism. Harindranath points out that journalism is characterized by an absence of voices of asylum seekers and refugees (as also became clear in my earlier discussion of news media and humanitarian interventions), which according to him continues their marginalization, as they are "open to be named and unnamed, ignored or vilified in the public arena."⁹⁶ Asylum seekers and refugees are continuously spoken about, they are the object of representation, but are never allowed to speak, are never the subject. Thus, Harindranath concludes, asylum seekers and refugees are subaltern.⁹⁷

However, in Harindranath's explanation of Spivak's notion of 'subalternity', there is a slight yet significant difference from my understanding of her essay. Harindranath states that "subalternity is characterised by the *denial* [emphasis mine] of a voice."⁹⁸ To *deny* the subaltern a voice implies a choice, a conscious and active refusal, rather than an impossibility. So, while Harindranath suggests that the subaltern cannot speak, because they are not allowed a voice, the way I understand it the subaltern cannot speak, because the subaltern voice is not understood by those in power, the majority/'Us'. Defining subalternity in this way, I am left questioning whether asylum seekers and refugees can still be seen as subaltern. Is it possible for 'Them' to speak to 'Us' in their own voice and for us to understand them?

In "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," Kobena Mercer delves into an example of what happens when a minority that has historically been without discursive power suddenly finds a platform from which to address the majority (and thus loses their subaltern status, as understood by Harindranath). Discussing an exhibition of black artists in post-war Britain, called *The Other Story* (Hayward Gallery, 1989), Mercer questions why the criticism was overwhelmingly focused on extra-artistic issues concerning race and racism, instead of aesthetics and artistry.⁹⁹ According to him, the exhibition was expected to be representative of all that is black art, of all that had been rendered

⁹⁴ Ibid., 102-104.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 87.

⁹⁶ Harindranath, 3-4.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹⁹ Mercer, 61.

absent, and to perform an act of corrective inclusion.¹⁰⁰ As such, *The Other Story* carried an impossible responsibility, which Mercer refers to as the *burden of representation*.¹⁰¹

Mercer suggests that artists from minority backgrounds all (to some degree) carry a burden of representation.¹⁰² They are in a position of marginality and, as such, would only have limited access to cultural institutions. This means that each opportunity that does occur counts and casts them as representatives that (are expected to) speak for their entire community.¹⁰³ As it is impossible for one artist/one exhibition to tell an entire complex history in “one brief burst of discourse,” the work would almost inevitably be chaotic and/or simplified.¹⁰⁴ However, rather than focusing on whether the artist or exhibition fails to represent, Mercer proposes to “turn our attention to the conditions under which the story was told and how these conditions determined its telling.”¹⁰⁵

Connecting Mercer’s essay to asylum seekers and refugees, I of course have to acknowledge that there perhaps is no comparable body of asylum seeker/refugee art that has been rendered absent because of centuries of oppression, as is the case for black art. However, considering the burden of representation more broadly, it did become clear that asylum seekers and refugees as a social minority have a perpetually limited access to platforms from which to make their voices heard. Could this mean that those who do suddenly find a platform (artists or otherwise) are also cast as representatives for their entire community? And are they then also burdened with the task of corrective inclusion of all the absent, diverse and heterogeneous voices and stories of asylum seekers and refugees?

While Mercer speaks of conditions in the cultural field generally and I have spoken of platforms in general terms, I would like to add some nuance using a distinction between the *Margin* and the *Centre* as made by bell hooks. In “Choosing the Margin,” hooks argues that marginalized people have a choice between “the side of colonizing mentality” - the Centre - and the side of the oppressed - the Margin.¹⁰⁶ When choosing the Centre, the marginalized voice addresses those who dominate, the majority, which impacts the “nature and direction of our [the ‘Other’s’] words.”¹⁰⁷ The minority’s language (or, as I would say, the subaltern voice) is build up out of “those sounds and images that mainstream consumers find difficult to understand,”¹⁰⁸ while the language used in the Centre “is the

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 38 (1989): 15.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

oppressor's language;"¹⁰⁹ a language hooks herself needed to learn to attend graduate school, to write a dissertation, and to speak at job interviews, even though it is also a language that "carries the scent of [her] oppression."¹¹⁰ It is clear that hooks would agree with Mercer's statement that conditions determine the telling. However, hooks also points out that there is more than the restricting conditions of the Centre, that there is also a space for the marginalized to speak more freely and in their own voice, the space she refers to as the Margin.

To hooks, the Margin is a space deeply needed by the marginalized "if we are to survive whole, our souls intact."¹¹¹ It would be a "radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world,"¹¹² instead of having to relate to notions of the world produced by the colonizer/the majority. I conclude from this that there is a possibility for people from a minority background to speak in their own (subaltern) voice and to create art without the burden of representation. There is a choice between the Margin and the Centre. Yet, I also question whether this choice is completely free. Even though the Margin as a space is needed to sustain a sense of self and an own sense of the world, I would argue that speaking in the Centre is also needed in order to contest the structures that oppress the speaker/artist and the minority group they come to represent. As dominant discourses are produced and sustained in the Centre, the power needed to impact on and possibly shift these discourses is also located there. Thus, dominant discourses need to be contested in this space as well. Gaining access to a platform to address the Centre/the majority is then a chance to fight the structures that keep you oppressed. Yet, that fight inevitably comes with restrictions in language (with the risk that the subaltern voice is not understood) and a burden of representation.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

3) Issues of (Self-)Representation in the Practice of Fada Theatre

In the previous chapter, I discussed issues of (self-)representation of social minorities, as theorized within academic discourse. In this chapter, I will discuss how these issues translate to the practice of Fada Theatre. The central question is: how have issues of (self-)representation taken shape in the context of creating and performing *Talent on the Run*? In order to answer this question, I have conducted a semi-structured interview with Ramez Basheer and Ahmad Al Herafi, who are actors as well as the founders and directors of Fada Theatre. Nancy Ubert, chairwoman of the Dutch board of the Fada Theatre foundation and beloved “mother” of the familial cast and crew, has also been present at half of the interview. She has joined Fada Theatre in the early beginnings, has offered dramaturgical support, and witnessed many of the struggles Basheer and Al Herafi have had to deal with. The conducted interview was informed by my findings in the previous chapter, yet it was semi-structured to leave space for Basheer and Al Herafi to bring up topics of their own and to discuss experiences that did not emerge from the consulted theory. The interview questions that I set up beforehand can be found in the appendix.

In the interview, we spoke a mix of Dutch and English. These are my languages, languages the majority in The Netherlands speaks and that Basheer and Al Herafi have had to learn and are still learning in order to integrate. As such, the artists could not always easily express their thoughts and feelings and at times we might not have understood each other fully. Thus, there is also a significant amount of interpretation in the findings presented here; these are my words, which are informed by theirs, but not quite their own.

In this chapter, I will firstly address Basheer and Al Herafi’s time at the asylum seekers centre of Alphen aan den Rijn. Connecting their experiences at this facility to the theory on ‘discourse’ and ‘identity’ considered in chapter two, I will discuss the atmosphere, specific events, and experiences with Dutch people that have led to the creation of *Talent on the Run*. In the second part of this chapter, I will address the issues Basheer and Al Herafi ran into in creating and performing *Talent on the Run*. I will work on the concept of ‘subalternity’ to address the issues of voice that Basheer and Al Herafi experienced. The previously discussed theory of the ‘burden of representation’ will help me to address audience expectations as well as the artists’ own feelings of responsibility.

3.1 How It Began

Let us start at the beginning, I said to commence the interview. I requested Basheer and Al Herafi to talk about their decision to make a theatre performance back when they stayed in the asylum

seekers centre of Alphen aan den Rijn. The two artists politely answered my question, but afterwards it became clear that, to them, this was not the beginning at all. Al Herafi asked if he could go back further in time, back to when they were still living in Syria.¹¹³ Basheer and Al Herafi had been working together since 2008 and performed not just in their home country, but also in Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon. In 2011 the Syrian war broke out, which changed their lives forever. The two artists feared that, if they stayed at home, they were going to die alongside their families. They discussed the possibility of fleeing together and agreed that they had to conduct a plan. They anticipated that their search for a new home would consist mostly of waiting and Basheer and Al Herafi were determined not to waste their time. They decided to document their flight on film and later continued to record their time within the asylum seekers centre of Alphen aan den Rijn. Initially this was meant for Al Herafi's daughter, for when she is older and might ask her father why he had come to the Netherlands. Later the two artists decided to develop the movie for a broader audience, because they noticed that many countries had that same question of why 'They' (asylum seekers and refugees in general) came 'Here'. However, events at the asylum seekers centre led Basheer and Al Herafi to eventually take a different route with their project.

Recalling their time at the asylum seekers centre of Alphen aan den Rijn, Basheer and Al Herafi described a "negative energy" plaguing the facility. The people there would suffer from perpetual sadness, residents were stirring up fights, and several people had attempted to commit suicide. Basheer and Al Herafi explained that everyone was just waiting for news about their right to stay in the Netherlands and worrying about the family members they had to leave behind, about the war back home, and about money.¹¹⁴ Moreover, many asylum seekers did not leave the facility at all for months on end, because they were afraid of the Dutch people they would run into. There had been incidents in which Dutch people have spit at asylum seekers or thrown things at them, such as ketchup or crumpled up paper set on fire. Al Herafi suggested that not being able to go outside or to work was especially difficult for Syrian people. He described it as feeling like an animal, like a cow, with your days existing of only sleeping and eating.

This description by Al Herafi and the other outlined causes of the negative energy in the asylum seekers centre appear to be in line with the refugeeness conceptualized by Marie Lacroix. In chapter two, I showed that asylum seekers are reduced to a unilateral identity by government policy, because they are unable to work or study and are cut off from their families (they are only left with their new identities as asylum seekers/refugees). From my interview with Basheer and Al Herafi, it

¹¹³ "I like, if I can, vertellen [tell] the story from A to Z."

¹¹⁴ Al Herafi said, "if I go to this person and ask him: why you want kill yourself? He will say: I just wait. I don't know what wait, and my family there, and a lot of problem." Basheer added: "you already wait for six or eight months without anything [...], it's just like you throw away anything from your life."

becomes clear that their fellow residents in the asylum seekers centre were consumed by such refugeeness; they experienced negative emotions as a result of not being able to be productive and having to worry about money and the family-members left behind. Not being able to go outside because of Dutch aggressors, however, seems to have a different cause. Olga Guedes Bailey and Ramaswami Harindranath showed that in the discourse presented in Western news media asylum seekers and refugees are predominantly depicted as criminals, a threat and a problem. They also pointed out that members of the public usually have little direct contact with asylum seekers and refugees. As such, the presented stereotypes would be a strong force in shaping public opinion. From the account of Basheer and Al Herafi, it appears that this discourse of Western news media has impacted the way Dutch people see and furthermore approach asylum seekers. They have taken the stereotypes to be the truth; asylum seekers are bad people and they need to be chased away.

In our interview, Basheer and Al Herafi also expressed having met many Dutch people who wanted to help them. However, Basheer told me that he often felt that he was offered help only because he is an asylum seeker/refugee.¹¹⁵ To the helpers it would not matter who he is as an individual, the only thing that matters is his refugeeness. In the previous chapter, Prem Kumar Rajaram and Liisa H. Malkki argued that humanitarian interventions present asylum seekers and refugees as pure victims. By amplifying the neediness of asylum seekers and refugees, the interventions aim to generate support. Judging from the experiences of Basheer and Al Herafi, this discourse also found a translation to the Dutch public. Even though the Dutch helpers approached them kindly, here again asylum seekers and refugees are treated in a certain way on the basis of stereotypes.

The negative energy in the asylum seekers centre took a turn for the worse when a suicide attempt tragically succeeded. The event made Basheer and Al Herafi feel like their documentary project was not enough anymore. They needed to do something quicker, something that would not only address a non-asylum seeker/non-refugee audience, but also their fellow asylum seekers/refugees. Al Herafi pointed out that there are many people in Syria and in camps in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, who would give anything to change places with them. He wanted to tell his fellow residents that they have a chance to build a new life for themselves and that they should make the most of their time.¹¹⁶ With the goal of awaking people's hopes and dreams again, the two artists gathered a group of Syrian asylum seekers and together created the theatre performance *Talent on the Run*. In itself, the act of creating a performance showed how one can express their feelings productively and can

¹¹⁵ "like Nancy, me and Ahmad do not feel anything there, because she act with us as real family. Only this woman. But the others I'm always feel: maybe he help me because I am refugee."

¹¹⁶ "So we have chance now. We have to give this chance and working to new life. For your family, they will come."

effectively use the time in the asylum seekers centre; it showed a way of resisting the reduction to only refugeeness. While Lacroix pointed out that asylum seekers tend to negotiate their refugeeness by emphasizing their past subjectivities and by explaining the circumstances that led to their current position, Basheer and Al Herafi put their focus on the future, on building new identities on top of and in spite of refugeeness. Soon, others in the asylum seekers centre started taking initiatives of their own, such as the making and selling of foods from their home countries.

Next to providing a morale boost for fellow asylum seekers and refugees, Basheer and Al Herafi wanted *Talent on the Run* to send a message to Dutch people as well. On the one hand, the performance was meant to address the main question of the documentary project: why have asylum seekers and refugees come here? The artists wanted to show that people like them, coming from places of war, have a legitimate reason for coming to the Netherlands. On the other hand, being especially affected by the aggressive manner in which Dutch people have approached asylum seekers, Basheer and Al Herafi wished to show that asylum seekers and refugees are not bad people. They wanted to invite the Dutch audience to look at them, not as asylum seekers or refugees, but as humans.¹¹⁷ As such, the performance would also be a way of resisting and negotiating the discourse presented by Western news media and its translation to the Dutch public.

3.2 Creating and performing *Talent on the Run*

Addressing a Dutch audience as asylum seekers and later as refugees came with several artistic constraints for Basheer and Al Herafi. The artists pointed out that it was difficult to get their thoughts and feelings across, since their mother tongue, the Arabic language, is not understood by the majority in the Netherlands. Further complicating things, they are also not (or not yet, since they are expected to assimilate) proficient in the languages of the majority.¹¹⁸ As such, the artists chose to accompany each scene in *Talent on the Run* (all written and performed in Arabic) with the projection of a Dutch summary that was acquired with the help of Dutch volunteers. Basheer and Al Herafi also paid special attention to expressiveness in movements of the body and face of each actor and added a Q&A-session to the end of the performance. This Q&A-session would allow them to clarify scenes that audience members might not have understood.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ "They talk about us: we are bad people," Basheer said, "so we want to tell them we are not. There is bad people from us, but also we have good people. Don't look to us as just refugees. Look to us as human."

¹¹⁸ "If I want uitleggen [to explain] my feelings, I can't," Al Herafi said, "if you speak Arabic and I speak Arabic, you will understand me [one] hundred procent [percent]. But now I can't."

¹¹⁹ "Someone, maybe he will understand this sentence or sketch not very well, maybe he will understand this sketch in another way," Al Herafi said, "so very important to make contact with people the same moment after the performance."

Basheer and Al Herafi also ran into difficulties as a result of cultural differences. Specific references and symbolism, although commonplace to them and their fellow Syrian asylum seekers/refugees, were not understood by Dutch audience members. As such, even after having performed *Talent on the Run* several times, Basheer and Al Herafi continued to work on the play. They have asked Ubert to be the eyes and ears of the Dutch audience, since she has a clearer idea of what Dutch people will understand. Like a dramaturge, Ubert has asked questions when she thought parts might not make sense and made suggestions when scenes needed further clarification. One example is the addition of a video at the start of the performance. In this video, images are shown of Syrian city life, of the people there, and later of the city and its people being bombed. Since (most) Dutch people do not know what it is like to live in a place of war, these images would help them to understand the circumstances many asylum seekers and refugees left behind.¹²⁰

In the previous chapter, I pointed to restrictions in voice that people from a minority can experience when addressing, what bell hooks has called, the Centre. In trying to reach the powerful Centre, the minority voice would have to adapt to the languages and the notions of the world held in this space. In the case of Fada Theatre, the Centre can be seen as taken up by the Dutch majority. Above, it became clear that Basheer and Al Herafi have had to make certain choices in the creation of *Talent on the Run* in order to specifically speak to the Dutch public. They have had to adapt to the Centre's literal and symbolic languages, because their own voice is not understood. For this adaptation, they were furthermore dependent on Dutch people, who have helped with textual, visual, and cultural translations. Speaking through Dutch people in this way can be seen as a suppression of their own voice, a subaltern voice making space for a voice the Dutch audience *would* understand.

Despite this suppression, Basheer and Al Herafi also found a new freedom of voice in the Netherlands. Basheer explained to me that, back in Syria, they could not address politics or speak negatively about certain levels of the government. If they were to do a critical performance on these topics, their play would be interrupted and Basheer and Al Herafi would be sent directly to prison.¹²¹ Compared to back home, it felt like they could say anything they wanted in the Netherlands.

Thus far, Basheer and Al Herafi have had the opportunity to perform *Talent on the Run* seventy-six times. This admirably large number of performances together with an equally large number of Q&A-sessions provided the artists with ample feedback. It surprised them that Dutch audience members

¹²⁰ "We try to transport the war in theatre, you know?" With the video, Al Herafi explained, "I give you space to understand. I give you space to imagine."

¹²¹ "You can talk around government, but first level, you can't. You will be.. you will go to prison directly. [...] They will stop your play and they will cut you and then directly to prison."

always asked them about the realness of the presented stories.¹²² Before two women joined the production, they were also criticized for the cast being all male (which was mostly a result of the asylum seekers centre of Alphen aan den Rijn being all male).¹²³ In chapter two, the work of Kobena Mercer gave insight into the burden of representation, where black artists who attain a rare opportunity to speak in/to the Centre are cast as representatives for their entire community. They are expected to perform an act of corrective inclusion for all those who have been rendered absent by centuries of oppression. What first alerted Mercer to the existence of a burden of representation was the criticism the exhibition he studied received; it was overwhelmingly concerned with extra-artistic issues instead of aesthetics and artistry. The responses Basheer and Al Herafi received reveal an equal concern with extra-artistic issues and alert me to the artists having been burdened as well. Their audiences were concerned with how representative the performance is for all asylum seekers and refugees and their experiences. Their feedback reveals that they expected or even requested *Talent on the Run* to be fully representative.

During our interview, it became clear that Basheer and Al Herafi also set themselves the task of being representative. After asking them if they felt like people looked at *Talent on the Run* as if it is about all asylum seekers and refugees, they responded that in fact this is what they hope for. They chose to present stories of different individuals who have had to flee, not just to share these specific experiences, but also to represent the story of asylum seekers and refugees as a whole.¹²⁴ Al Herafi expressed that he did feel a certain pressure, because he was performing his own personal and very recent history. After having performed *Talent on the Run* several times it started to feel like he was stuck in that story.¹²⁵ He wished to move on from it and focus on his new life, but could not just yet, because it was too important for the artists to cease every opportunity to spread their message. Basheer added that in the new performance they are creating, which will be a sequel to *Talent on the Run* about integration, they will no longer play themselves on stage. They plan to perform the very opposite of their own stories in order to protect themselves from feeling this pressure again.

Although they are working on a new performance concerning asylum seekers and refugees, Basheer and Al Herafi insist that they want to make something completely different, something removed from the topic of war. Al Herafi told me that Syria is famous for their drama and that he

¹²² Basheer said: “there is also always, zesenzeventig keer [seventy-six times], we get same question. All. That question: is this real story?”

¹²³ “When Ster en Rama kom spelen met ons [before Ster and Rama came to perform with us], it was vargen: waarom alleen man? [it was asked: why only men?],” Al Herafi said. “This is very important question. But now wij hebben euh.. maar nu hebben wij Sally en Hoda ook spelen met ons [But now Sally and Hoda also perform with us].”

¹²⁴ “Actually, we make it like that. We make it as general for whole refugees,” Basheer explained, later adding that “we made eight stories, but this eight stories for whole refugees, not only for us.”

¹²⁵ “I start to be tired, you know, because [...] every time, every one, you are talking about yourself,” he explained. “I want to forget.. Yes, because I come to this country only to begin, to make new life.”

wants to bring Syrian drama to the Dutch public.¹²⁶ Basheer would like to address Dutch problems, just like they used to address societal problems in their performances back in Syria. Yet, at the moment he feels like he is too much of an outsider to fully comprehend the contemporary societal issues of the Netherlands.¹²⁷ Despite these desires, the two artists feel that they need to stick with the topic of asylum seekers and refugees, at least for now. On the one hand, it is important to them to continue to oppose the negative ideas some Dutch people have about asylum seekers and refugees for their own personal safety and future prospects and for those of their fellow asylum seekers and refugees. On the other hand, Basheer and Al Herafi feel like it would be improper for them to address anything else when there are still people like them who have to flee their countries.¹²⁸ From all this, I conclude that the two artists carry a burden of representation, not only because they are cast as representatives by their Dutch audiences, but also because they themselves feel a strong responsibility towards others like them. They have a chance to address the Centre and will do anything they can to make a difference.

¹²⁶ "Syria is very famous with drama. [...] In Nederland [the Netherlands] we searching about drama, we can't find drama."

¹²⁷ "Until now we don't have all the ideas around Dutch people and what's the problems. And we are not Dutch people also."

¹²⁸ Basheer thought people might ask them: "why you make something normal and you have war?"

4) Issues of (Self-)Representation Translated to *Talent on the Run*

In the previous chapter, I discussed how issues of (self-)representation have taken shape in the context of creating and performing *Talent on the Run*. The central question in this chapter is: how does *Talent on the Run* respond to the identified issues of (self-)representation? To answer this question, I will conduct a performance analysis. I use this method specifically, because while in the preceding chapter it became clear that Ahmad Al Herafi and Ramez Basheer have made conscious artistic decisions in light of the issues they have experienced, other choices that relate to issues of (self-)representation might have been made subconsciously. As Basheer said in our interview, some decisions were made on the basis of feelings rather than rational thought.¹²⁹

I base my analysis on the four performances that I have witnessed and the notes I have taken there.¹³⁰ I can only write on the basis of what I perceived as a Dutch and non-asylum seeker/non-refugee audience member. As such, this will be a partial and subjective account. In my analysis, I will focus on the ways in which Fada Theatre presents itself, the positions the performance appoints to the performers and the spectators, and the experiences that it enables for the audience. Subsequently, I will connect my findings to the theory discussed in chapter two and Al Herafi and Basheer's experiences discussed in chapter three.

The Q&A-session with which Fada Theatre routinely ends *Talent on the Run* will be treated as part of the performance; here as well the company positions itself and their audience in certain ways responding to issues of (self-)representation. The performance I saw at Bijlmer Parktheater ended in a Q&A-session hosted by the theatre. As such, this particular session will not be taken into account here. Because the play and the Q&A construct meaning in distinctly different ways, I will address these two parts of *Talent on the Run* separately.

4.1 The Play

4.1.1 Description

The dark auditorium is separated from the performance area by red and white barricade tape. The stage is empty. A video is projected on the back wall. To the sound of epic Arabic music Al Herafi and

¹²⁹ "Sometimes we just imagine, you know. We just feel something. [...] Just feeling it's more clear and more important for this audience."

¹³⁰ I have seen *Talent on the Run* at ZIMIHC Theater Stefanus (March 10, 2017), at the Dominicus Church of Amsterdam (March 24, 2017), at the International Community Arts Festival (March 29, 2017), and at Bijlmer Parktheater (June 11, 2017).

Basheer take the stage and stand to watch as images pass by of Syrian city life, of a young girl singing in the street, of themselves as actors performing in their home country. Then a bomb drops. The video shows images of war, of buildings being destroyed, of children hurt. A crying girl asks what they did to deserve this. The singing girl appears again and this time her song is accompanied by subtitles: she sings about longing to be free, just like everyone else. Another set of bombs drop, this time in the same clip as the girl.

When the projection turns to black the other cast members join the stage. They are with a group of six dark, bearded men and two dark, young women.¹³¹ All the actors are dressed in black pants, black shirts and black shoes. Each performs a movement sequence, miming distinct actions: a woman captures scenes with an invisible camera, a man drinks from an invisible bottle, a girl dances. Then we hear a bomb drop, the lights flash and the actors fall to the ground. After slowly getting up, the actors walk across the stage as if returning to their daily business. However, each finds a moment to grab a bag or suitcase from backstage; they are going to flee. Finally, Al Herafi is shown casually whistling, carefully placing his suitcase on the ground, and then quickly grabbing a life jacket from the front of the stage. He runs away.

A blue light reveals the actors on stage sitting next to each other. They are rocking from side to side to the sound of a ticking clock. When one actor says something, the others reply. The projection shows:

Where are we now? - I have no idea

Are we there yet? - Almost...

Hunger! - Do not talk about food. There are children here..

Thirst...

“Drink that water!” the others now shout in response.¹³² The light changes and the actor who first started talking stands up, faces the audience and begins a monologue. He shares a story of his life in Syria and what happened that made him flee: the projection tells us he had been a dentist, his son was struck in an attack and he could not save him. After the monologue, the blue lit boat-scene repeats itself. However, now another actor is the first to start asking questions and is the one to share an emotional story of why he needed to flee. The boat-scene is continuously alternated with a monologue until all the actors have shared their story. We hear of a woman who was not allowed to study medicine and then went into a warzone with her camera. Having been deeply affected by the atrocities she found, she decided to document everything to show the world what war really looks

¹³¹ The make-up of the cast changes slightly from show to show. In one of the performances I saw there were three women and six men.

¹³² Lines translated from Dutch.

like. We hear of a man who was laughed at for turning to liquor for relief. He believed the people around him were even more boozed up than him, seeing the world only through drunken eyes and not knowing how messed up it truly is. We hear of a girl whose parents disapproved of her dancing. She found her own way to an academy, only to be humiliated, abused and raped when the war hit. One actor stands apart. While the others tell their monologues, he is shown in the background frantically writing in the air as if he is documenting the stories. Once in a while he shouts a single line: "Enough of this injustice," "we have to talk to one another," and "Listen to us! Love us!"

After the last actor finishes their monologue, the boat-scene has changed. The cast lies down at the front of the stage. They start clapping their hands to the ground, faster and faster, until: they made it! The actors celebrate their arrival to shore, only to find one of them was not as fortunate. The writer lays on the ground, face-down, not moving. After collecting empty water bottles with notes in them, the actors break the barricade tape and step into the audience. They hand out the bottles to audience members and return to the stage. With everyone back together the actors make one last gesture: they reach out an open hand to the audience. The lights fade.

4.1.2 Analysis

With the barricade tape separating the audience from the actors for most of the performance, the play puts the audience and the actors at a distance from one another. This distance is intensified by the opening video suggesting the performed events take place faraway in Syria, by the Arabic music, and by the Arabic spoken text that is only understood through the projected translations and summaries. Furthermore, the actors look 'Other' to Dutch spectators, because of their dark skin and dark hair. A certain disconnection is created between 'Us' in the auditorium and 'Them' on stage.

In the play, the 'Others' share stories about how they lost everything because of war. All the different monologues follow the same format. Firstly, the audience is shown who the character was in Syria: they had a job, they had ambition, they drank alcohol, they went to school. Secondly, the monologues explain why the characters needed to flee: they lost their child, they saw too many atrocities, they were misunderstood, they were humiliated, abused, and raped. With the monologues following the same format it is suggested that the stories of all asylum seekers and refugees are fundamentally the same. They all used to live a normal life that was lost to war. The black clothing of the actors can be seen as a symbol of grief for the lost lives, but also as the removal of their individuality, of who they were in the past. Now they are only a homogeneous group of asylum seekers with tragic stories to tell.

The expressive movements of the actors, the epic music, and the emotional delivery of the

monologues invite the audience to feel pity for the characters. Breaking the tape at the end of the performance and suggesting that the characters have arrived 'Here' turns their last gesture into a direct invitation to the members of the audience. Their stretched out hands are there for us to take and seem to ask us for help. Now feeling sympathy for the characters, we know we should not leave them hanging.

In the previous chapter, it became clear that Al Herafi and Basheer intended to challenge the dominant discourse of Western news media that presents asylum seekers and refugees as bad and dangerous people. Interestingly, in the play of *Talent on the Run* they seem to do so by reproducing the opposing discourse presented by humanitarian interventions. This discourse depicts asylum seekers and refugees in an equally stereotypical manner: they are a homogeneous group of helpless 'Others'. Building on the work of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci in chapter two, I argued that discourses gain authority when they find reconfirmation. By reconfirming the discourse of humanitarian interventions, Al Herafi and Basheer give it a greater power and subsequently make it appear as more truthful, as how asylum seekers and refugees really are.

In chapter two, it was argued that identity is a way of imagining the 'Self' through discourse. The work of Stuart Hall showed that people can choose to attach to certain positions into which they are interpellated by diverse discourses. *Talent on the Run* is a performance in which the actors represent themselves and people like them. By adhering to humanitarian discourse, Al Herafi and Basheer can be seen to attach to and invest in the identity of asylum seekers and refugees as powerless victims. In chapter two it also became clear that the 'Self' is constructed through sets of difference. In positioning 'Them' as helpless, the stretched out hands position 'Us' as possible helpers. Just like in humanitarian interventions the audience is recruited to help the needy 'Other'.

The work of bell hooks has shown that a person from a minority background has to adhere to the notions of the world held in the Centre when trying to speak in this space. I equated this to the subaltern whose own voice is not understood and who is only read by the majority through their dominant discourses. Left with a choice between one dominant discourse presenting asylum seekers and refugees as a threat and another dominant discourse presenting them as threatened, Al Herafi and Basheer understandably preferred adhering to the latter. After all, this discourse and its translation to the Dutch public (as presented in chapter three) appears to be less immediately threatening to them; Dutch people acting in coherence with the discourse of humanitarian interventions offered help, while Dutch people holding notions similar to those presented in Western news media met asylum seekers and refugees with violence. Reconfirming the discourse of humanitarian interventions in the play of *Talent on the Run* gives it greater power over the discourse of Western news media. It offers an actual chance of combating it. Even though presenting

themselves as a homogeneous group of victims still depicts asylum seekers and refugees in a stereotypical way, at least it has the potential to keep them (and others like them) safe.

4.2 The Q&A

4.2.1 Description

During the applause the lights turn on in the auditorium. On stage the projection shows the names of Fada Theatre's cast- and crewmembers. They lock hands and take their bows. Tears are glistening in some of their eyes. They appear to be touched by the audience that (after every performance I have witnessed) has risen from their seats to give a standing ovation. Only after Nancy Ubert has taken the stage and addresses the audience through a microphone, the applause dies out.

Ubert introduces herself and invites the audience to stay for a Q&A-session with Fada Theatre. Audience members who wish to leave are given a moment to exit the auditorium. Then Ubert starts the session by asking the cast- and crew members to each introduce themselves with their names, their role in the company, and something extra, such as their hopes for the future. Afterwards, she opens the floor to the audience. Going into the auditorium with her microphone, Ubert takes their questions: are the stories real? Are the stories your own? What is it like to perform such personal and traumatic events? Why did you want to make this performance? What are your goals with *Talent on the Run*? Usually there are also audience members who ask about the meaning of certain parts of the play (what does the character that is constantly writing symbolize?) and people who take a moment to compliment the members of Fada Theatre for what they have created together.

As the founders and directors of Fada Theatre, Al Herafi and Basheer answer most of the questions. Both try to respond in Dutch to their best ability. Otherwise, a crewmember translates the answers from Arabic to English (which most Dutch people understand). When needed, Ubert translates the English to Dutch and audience questions from Dutch to English. The Q&A is concluded with an invite to the audience. They are told that they are welcome to come talk to the members of Fada Theatre at the bar or other communal space at the venue.

4.2.2 Analysis

In the Q&A the focus shifts from the characters of *Talent on the Run* to the people behind the

performance. By giving only a little information away at the start of the session, the interest of the audience is sparked. We are invited to ask questions and invest in getting to know more about the people on stage and the performance they have created. With this set-up, the cast- and crewmembers are positioned as knowledgeable subjects. The audience is positioned as people who do not yet know and who can learn from them. While this still leaves two separate groups, the Q&A-session makes the audience work to bridge the distance between 'Them' and 'Us'.

The members of Fada Theatre are shown to work at bridging this gap as well. They actively listen to their audience and respond to us in our languages: Dutch and English. While a few members are proficient in English, for most it would have been easier to speak in Arabic and have someone translate their answers. However, their attempts at speaking the languages of their audience show a willingness to adapt and fit in with 'Us'.

In the Q&A-session the attention is further drawn to the new subjectivities that were created with Fada Theatre. By amplifying these subjectivities the image of one-dimensional victimhood is complicated; they are not just asylum seekers/refugees, but also directors, actors, technicians, and set builders. Moreover, shifting the attention to the people who have created *Talent on the Run* shows that these are people who have taken initiative, who were eager to do something, and who have developed the agency to do something for themselves and others like them. It appears that they do not need our help after all, but rather need us it to listen.

Above it became clear that the play of *Talent on the Run* reconfirms one of the dominant discourses on asylum seekers and refugees that the majority/the Centre is familiar with, namely the discourse of humanitarian interventions. By doing so, it is given more power over its opposing dominant discourse of Western news media. Having established that asylum seekers and refugees are in truth a homogenous group of victims, the Q&A-session of *Talent on the Run* starts adding to that picture. It appears to say that indeed they are all victims who have lost their previous subjectivities to war, but they are also more than that. They are not just asylum seekers and refugees, but also knowledgeable subjects, creators, and agents. Thus, while in the previous chapter I argued that Al Herafi and Basheer provided their fellow asylum seekers with a way of resisting refugeeness, here it becomes clear that the creation of new subjectivities with *Talent on the Run* and the amplification of them in front of a Dutch audience are also a way of negotiating the discourse of humanitarian interventions.

As their own voice is not understood by the majority in the Netherlands, Al Herafi and Basheer have had to work with the Centre's languages and notions of the world. However, in spite of (literal and symbolic) language differences, they were still able to get their voice through by building on top of notions held in the Centre. Adding to a stereotypical depiction of asylum seekers and refugees with the Q&A-session, Al Herafi and Basheer have been able to complicate it. Furthermore,

by inviting the audience to ask questions and thus inform themselves, they have made 'Us' complicit in deconstructing the stereotype of 'Them'.

5) Conclusion

5.1 Summary

In this paper, I discussed issues of (self-)representation of social minorities, which I later put in relation to Fada Theatre's *Talent on the Run*. *Talent on the Run* is a verbatim theatre performance about people having to flee their home country. It was initiated and directed by two asylum seekers (now refugees), Ramez Basheer and Ahmad Al Herafi, during their stay in the asylum seekers centre of Alphen aan den Rijn.

From my theoretical discussion in chapter two, it became clear that dominant discourses are at the foundation of issues of (self-)representation experienced by social minorities. Being continuously reconfirmed by forces of power, these discourses inform what is seen as natural and as the truth. Representation has been pointed out as a discursive force that can construct notions of difference. These notions commonly take the shape of binary oppositions in which one pole has power over the other. To maintain the social order, the 'Other' is commonly represented through stereotypes in which they are reduced to only a few characteristics, denying them human complexity and heterogeneity. In the discussion of dominant representations of asylum seekers and refugees, it became clear that in Western news media this social minority is predominantly represented as criminals, a threat and a problem. In humanitarian interventions they tend to be represented as victims, helpless and troubled. Thus, one set of negative stereotypes is contested by a set of allegedly more humane opposites, but with a similarly reductive effect. Moreover, the voices of asylum seekers and refugees are never included in these media iterations, nor do the Western audiences usually have direct contact with them. As such, the dominant representations greatly impact how asylum seekers and refugees are imagined and understood by the Western public/'Us'.

In the second part of chapter two, I pointed out that identity is a way of imagining the 'Self' through discourse. In every society different discourses exist side by side. As such, people can choose to invest in certain positions into which they are interpellated and have possibilities to resist or negotiate the identities appointed to them. Asylum seekers would tend to resist and negotiate the refugeeeness that is newly imposed on them by amplifying their past subjectivities and explaining the circumstances that led to losing these identities. 'Refugeeness' can be described as a reduction to only the identity of asylum seeker/refugee as a result of state policy not giving official recognition of their professional competencies, state policy disallowing them to work or study, and by asylum seekers and refugees often being cut off from their families.

In the last part, I pointed to pressures and restrictions experienced by people/artists from a minority when they attain a platform in the space of the majority, also referred to as the 'Centre'. With their minority group having persistently been misrepresented by outsiders, they would suffer from the burden of representation; these people/artists are expected to serve as representatives for their entire minority and to perform an act of corrective inclusion. Moreover, because their own subaltern voice is not understood by the majority, they are forced to communicate in the Centre's languages and adhere to their notions of the world, those same languages and notions that (are used to) oppress minorities. Even though speaking in the Centre comes with pressures and restrictions in voice, I argued that speaking in the Centre is necessary for someone of a minority position in order to contest the structures that keep them oppressed.

Turning to the concrete case of Fada Theatre, in chapter three I demonstrated how several of the issues of (self-)representation mentioned above played a role in the context of creating and performing *Talent on the Run*. In my interview with Basheer and Al Herafi, they expressed feeling like many Dutch people treated them in specific ways, not because of who they are as individuals, but because they are asylum seekers/refugees. I concluded that the two dominant discourses on asylum seekers and refugees found a translation to the Dutch public. Dutch people holding the discourse of Western news media as the truth approached them with violence. Others acted in line with the discourse of humanitarian interventions and offered help out of political correctness or pity.

Basheer and Al Herafi said that their goal with *Talent on the Run* was to show Dutch people that asylum seekers and refugees are not bad and that they have legitimate reasons for coming to the Netherlands. Thus, they placed their focus on resisting the discourse of Western news media, perhaps because it was most immediately threatening to them. Basheer and Al Herafi also made *Talent on the Run* for fellow asylum seekers and refugees. The artists described people in their asylum seekers centre feeling sad and sometimes harming others or themselves as a result of being reduced to refugeeness. The artists tried to show them how they can resist this reduction by building new identities on top of and in spite of refugeeness.

On the topic of subalternity, it became clear that speaking in the Centre for Basheer and Al Herafi came with restrictions in voice, because Arabic is not understood by most Dutch people and because references and symbolism are culturally specific. Their command of Dutch (and English) and their knowledge of Dutch culture were still too limited to address the majority on their own power. This meant Basheer and Al Herafi were dependent on help from the Dutch majority to translate their voice. Furthermore, they realized that they needed to adapt the body language of themselves and their fellow actors to communicate more effectively and added a post-performance Q&A-session in order to clarify possible misunderstandings.

Lastly turning to the burden of representation, it became clear that Dutch audience reactions to *Talent on the Run* have been predominantly concerned with the realness of the stories and the diversity of the cast. I concluded that people expected and requested the performance to be representative of all asylum seekers and refugees. Basheer and Al Herafi acknowledged this and stated that they wanted this task for themselves as well. However, as time passed they felt their task becoming increasingly more burdensome. The artists would prefer to move on from performing the personal stories that weigh them down, but find themselves unable to do so. On the one hand, this is because the job of contesting the dominant discourse of asylum seekers and refugees as a threat is not finished. On the other hand, Basheer and Al Herafi feel that it would be improper for them to address other topics when war is still pushing people into the same positions as they were and are in.

In the fourth chapter, I demonstrated how the play and the Q&A-session of *Talent on the Run* respond to the issues of (self-)representation identified above. I argued that the play constructs a distance between 'Us', the audience in the auditorium, and 'Them', the 'Others' on stage. The characters are shown to have lost their previous identities to war and it is suggested that they are now only a homogeneous group of asylum seekers. The audience is invited to feel pity for them. This invite combined with the last gesture in the play, where the actors reach out their hands to the audience, suggests that the right thing for 'Us' to do is to take the hands and help these needy 'Others'. Thus, in Basheer and Al Herafi's mission of combating the discourse of Western news media, their play reconfirms the discourse of humanitarian interventions.

Before, I argued that a person from a minority group needs to adhere to the notions of the world held in the Centre in order to be understood by the majority. Basheer and Al Herafi understandably preferred adhering to one of the dominant discourses on asylum seekers and refugees over the other. By reconfirming the discourse positioning them as helpless victims, the two artists give it greater power over the discourse that led some Dutch people to approach them aggressively. Thus, I argued that even though a stereotypical image is maintained within the play, it does have the potential to keep them and fellow asylum seekers and refugees safe.

Following the play, the audience is introduced to the people behind *Talent on the Run* and is invited to ask them questions in a Q&A-session. In this session, 'They' are positioned as knowledgeable subjects and 'Us' as people who can learn from them. While the two groups are still positioned as separate from each other, the audience is made to work at closing the distance by asking questions. The members of Fada Theatre are shown to work at this as well; their attempts at speaking Dutch and English (the languages of the Centre) show a willingness to adapt to 'Us'. Besides knowledgeable subjects, the Q&A also positions the cast- and crewmembers of Fada Theatre as creators and people who have developed the agency to do something for themselves. This is where it

becomes clear that the asylum seekers and refugees do not need help from 'Us' after all, but rather need 'Us' to listen.

With the emphasis on asylum seekers and refugees as knowledgeable subjects, creators, and agents, *Talent on the Run* not only resists a reduction to refugeeness, but also negotiates the discourse of humanitarian interventions. By adding to its stereotypical depiction of asylum seekers and refugees, the Q&A is able to complicate the discourse. As such, in working from notions already held by the majority, Basheer and Al Herafi are able to get their own voice through as well. They furthermore have been able to make 'Us' work along in deconstructing the stereotype of 'Them'.

5.2 Conclusion

The central question of this paper was: how can the ways in which Fada Theatre presents itself in *Talent on the Run* be understood in relation to issues of (self-)representation? From my research, it became clear that Fada Theatre chose to address the Dutch public, because they wished to resist and negotiate the dominant discourses that have informed the Dutch and led people to approach asylum seekers and refugees either violently or as a charity project. In the play of *Talent on the Run*, Fada Theatre resists the dominant discourse in which asylum seekers and refugees are imagined as a threat. They do so by reconfirming and thus giving more power to its opposing dominant discourse in which they are imagined (equally stereotypically) as helpless victims. Fada Theatre ends *Talent on the Run* with a Q&A-session that negotiates this opposing discourse. They emphasize the people behind the performance - their knowledge, creativity, and agency - and in doing so deconstruct the stereotype.

Fada Theatre speaks in the Centre and on the topic of asylum seekers and refugees specifically, because they are expected to represent this social minority by their Dutch audience and because they feel responsible for the future safety and prospects of both themselves and their fellow asylum seekers and refugees. They have a chance to fight the oppressive discourses and will not let it go to waste. In addressing the Dutch public, Fada Theatre presents itself in ways that this audience in particular would understand. They have adapted to the Centre's (literal and symbolic) languages, they have modified their performance style to communicate more clearly to the Dutch and added parts to *Talent on the Run* with the purpose of clarifying unavoidable misunderstanding. This shows that Fada Theatre constrained its own voice to make room for a voice the Dutch audience can comprehend.

In the introduction to this paper, I discussed previous studies on verbatim theatre in which the stories of vulnerable minorities are staged under the guidance of someone outside of the

minority group. The studies pointed out ethical issues of members of the minority not having ownership over their own stories; they cannot choose for themselves what they will express of it to others. In *Talent on the Run* the ownership lay fully in the hands of members of the minority group itself. Yet, from my study it became clear that even in such a scenario, the minority members cannot freely choose what they share of their stories or in which ways. As Kobena Mercer stated, the conditions determine the telling. Minority artists *need* to address certain topics and *specifically* in the Centre, bringing along a burden of representation and restrictions in voice, *because* they have to contest the structures of their oppression. As such, even with full ownership over the creative product, the minority voice still is not fully free.

5.3 Discussion

In this paper I have stated that dominant discourses are at the foundation of issues of (self-)representation experienced by social minorities. Considering the scope of my research, I have built upon the findings of others with regard to Western dominant discourses on asylum seekers and refugees. While the experiences of Ramez Basheer and Ahmad Al Herafi confirmed the existence of these discourses within the spatial and temporal context in which *Talent on the Run* was created, it would be instructive to study Dutch discourses (or even more locally the discourses of Alphen aan den Rijn) in more detail in order to get a more intricate look into the ways the performance resists/negotiates certain representations.

Another aspect that is worth further consideration is the distribution of power within a group such as Fada Theatre. From my interview with Basheer and Al Herafi it became clear that they were dependent on the help from the majority in order to translate their work to the Dutch audience. I further wonder about the fellow cast and crew members of Fada Theatre (who mostly have no background in acting or theatre production) and their dependency on Basheer and Al Herafi to get their voices across. In this same regard, it is worth taking the intersection of different forms of marginality into consideration. I wonder about the female asylum seekers/refugees that joined Fada Theatre later on and about who we are not seeing, whose voices remain unheard, especially in light of the intention of *Talent on the Run* to speak for all asylum seekers and refugees.

Lastly, I speculate about the future position of Fada Theatre and other asylum seeker/refugee artists. Basheer and Al Herafi have expressed that they want to move on from creating art on the topic of asylum seekers and refugees to address other themes, but felt that they could not do this yet. I wonder if there ever will come a time when they will be accepted as part of the Dutch majority or if they, no matter how well they integrate, will always be seen and treated as

not actually belonging to 'Us', meaning their positions as minority artists would not change. The position of Surinamese, Antillean, Turkish, and Moroccan artists in the Netherlands suggests that this may be an uphill battle. I also think of the Dutch citizens who, in spite of their families having lived in the Netherlands for multiple generations, are still seen as Surinamese, Antillean, Turkish or Moroccan. Will Basheer and Al Herafi (and for that matter any other asylum seeker/refugee artist) ever find a position in Western society to freely speak on a topic of their choosing? Will the asylum seeker/refugee identity ever fade?

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Appendix: Interview Questions

This interview has been conducted on December 6, 2017 at the home of Ahmad Al Herafi. While I constructed the interview in Dutch, I have translated most questions to English during the interview itself, because the two artists felt more comfortable with this language/using a mix between Dutch and English. The questions listed here were used as entrance points into different topics. We have not gone through them linearly, as I let the structure of the interview come mostly from Al Herafi and Ramez Basheer in order to leave room for them to bring up topics of their own.

About	Problematiek rondom (zelf)representatie, die kunstenaars kunnen ervaren als zij in een positie komen te staan waarin zij een grotere minderheidsgroep vertegenwoordigen.
How it started	Ik wil graag terug gaan naar het begin. Jullie hebben in eerste instantie een voorstelling gemaakt voor de mensen in het AZC. - Waarom wilden jullie dit maken? / Waarom vonden jullie dit belangrijk? - Hoe zag de voorstelling er toen uit? / Wat was het doel van de voorstelling? Wat wilden jullie de mensen meegeven? - Hoe werd erop gereageerd? / Waar kwamen deze reacties vandaan denken jullie? / Waarom raakte mensen het zo?
Addressing the Centre /Subalternity	Later is het idee gekomen om de voorstelling door te ontwikkelen voor een Nederlands publiek. - Waar kwam dit idee vandaan? / Waarom vonden jullie het belangrijk dat het Nederlandse publiek dit zou zien? - Wat wilden jullie het Nederlandse publiek meegeven? / Was dit anders dan bij het publiek in het AZC? - Waren er nu andere dingen belangrijk dan toen het voor het publiek in het AZC was? <u>Zo ja</u> : wat? En waarom? - Hadden jullie het idee dat jullie het Nederlandse publiek op een andere manier moesten aanspreken? * Dat jullie aan hen andere dingen moesten vertellen en laten zien? * Of misschien op een andere manier dingen vertellen en laten zien? <u>Zo ja</u> : hoe was dit anders? / Wat betekende dit voor de voorstelling?
Dominant discourses & resistance /negotiation	- Hadden jullie het idee dat het Nederlandse publiek al een bepaald beeld van jullie zou hebben omdat jullie vluchteling zijn? <u>Zo ja</u> : wat voor beeld? / Heeft dit invloed gehad op jullie voorstelling? En hoe jullie je daaromheen presenteren? <u>Zo ja</u> : op wat voor manier? Waarom?
Burden of representation	Toen ik Nancy voor het eerst sprak over of ik jullie misschien kon interviewen vertelde ze mij dat er veel mensen waren die graag jullie wilden spreken, omdat

	<p>ze een verhaaltje wilden schrijven over vluchtelingen in het algemeen.</p> <p>- Hebben jullie het idee dat er naar jullie wordt gekeken alsof jullie representatief zijn voor alle vluchtelingen? Als sprekend voor alle vluchtelingen?</p> <p><u>Zo ja:</u> Wat deed dit met jullie om in die positie te staan? Hoe hebben jullie dat ervaren?</p> <p>/ Hebben jullie dit ook als een druk ervaren?</p> <p><u>Zo ja:</u> wat voor druk? / Zou je die kunnen omschrijven?</p> <p>/ Heeft dit invloed gehad op de voorstelling? En op hoe jullie je daaromheen presenteren?</p> <p><u>Zo ja:</u> op wat voor manier? Waarom?</p>
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<p>Artistic choices > The play</p>	<p>De voorstelling begint met videobeelden van het stadsleven in Syrië, van jullie als acteurs en van de oorlog en alle schade die deze aanricht.</p> <p>- Waarom hebben jullie ervoor gekozen om dit met video te laten zien?</p> <p>De verhalen volgen allemaal hetzelfde format, waarin eerst wordt verteld wie die persoon was in Syrië en vervolgens waarom diegene moest vluchten.</p> <p>/ Waarom wilden jullie juist dit laten zien?</p> <p>/ Waarom vinden jullie het belangrijk om de individuele verhalen te vertellen ipv bijvoorbeeld een groot verhaal?</p> <p>/ Waarom in een vast format?</p> <p>- De acteurs dragen allemaal dezelfde soort kleding. Heeft dit een reden? / Waarom is dat?</p>
<p>Artistic choices > Q&A-session</p>	<p>Na afloop van iedere voorstelling hebben jullie ook een nagesprek.</p> <p>- Heeft dit een specifieke reden?</p> <p>/ Waarom vinden jullie dit belangrijk?</p> <p>- Vaak vertellen jullie ook dat mensen na afloop nog naar jullie toe mogen komen om een praatje te maken. Heeft dit een specifieke reden?</p> <p>/ Waarom vinden jullie dit belangrijk?</p>

<p>Audience responses</p>	<p>- Wat voor reacties krijgen jullie op de voorstelling?</p> <p>/ Wat doet dit met jullie? Wat betekent dit voor jullie? Waarom?</p> <p>Ik las dat jullie in het begin ook vragen kregen over waarom er geen vrouwen in de cast zaten.</p> <p>- Waarom denken jullie dat jullie hierop werden aangekeken? Dat jullie hiervoor verantwoordelijk werden gehouden?</p>
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<p>New / future projects</p>	<p>Tot slot ben ik ook benieuwd waar jullie nu mee bezig zijn.</p> <p>- Kunnen jullie me daar iets over vertellen?</p> <p>- Waar kwam(en) dit idee/ deze ideeën vandaan?</p> <p>/ Waarom vinden jullie dit belangrijk om te doen/maken?</p> <p>- Ervaren jullie dit maakproces anders dan toen jullie <i>Talent on the Run</i> maakten?</p>
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	<p><u>Zo ja</u>, waarom? / Voelen jullie eenzelfde soort druk? Dat je namens een grotere groep moet spreken?</p>
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