
Witnessing the Distant Other in the 21st Century

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On September 2, 2015, the photo of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year old Syrian refugee lying dead on the Aegean coast, has been widely distributed in social media and drew international attention. When his photo overpowered Western media depicting him as if in a deep state of sleep on a famous Turkish touristic town, I was in the US working on my book titled “Witnessing Stories of Distance” and thinking about the process of bearing witness to atrocities. As a Turkish national educated in the US, I have spent numerous beach vacations on the town which Aylan’s corpse was found and suddenly found myself in this problematic stance between the urge to know more about this boy who died in my home country and yet the relief to have witnessed his dead body through a third medium rather than seeing it on the beach during one of my vacations. After the dissemination of Kurdi’s photo, feelings of guilt and complicity surfaced and international aid organizations started campaigns for Syrian refugees. However, a couple of weeks later, despite arising sympathies towards refugees that began with Kurdi, European countries decided to take stricter measures to prevent the refugee flux to Europe. Although the image of Aylan Kurdi stroke us with a profound sense of empathy, it still did not move Western individuals to acknowledge the possibility of becoming neighbors with the very same refugees. Their heightened compassion on social media failed to stretch to real life, probably due to their short-sighted motivation to know more about his victimization and to remain distant from it simultaneously.

Western idea of humanitarianism revolves around helping and protecting the needy. With the advancement of social media, which is mostly utilized by the educated and urban populations, people find it even easier to help others and provide a safe sanctuary for the victimized albeit virtually. Likewise, as the publication of human rights narratives about atrocities that occurred elsewhere proliferate in the US, human rights abuses in Guantanamo Bay is less of a subject of inquiry except in academic circles. The tendency to keep a safe distance between an act of atrocity and oneself coincides with a likeminded approach to turn a blind eye to sites of suffering at home while showing a genuine interest to abuses committed elsewhere, outside the borders of homeland. This newly emerging interest in witnessing the victimized other has become a novel form of neo-colonialism.

In today's world, witnessing the suffering of distant others and visiting sites of memory and victimization abound. Every year, millions of tourists travel to Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in Japan, the Killing Fields in Cambodia, Auschwitz, the 9/11 Memorial in New York and other similar memorials and museums to commemorate past atrocities.¹ What draws us to these sites of suffering and to memories of the past is still a big question. This attraction to suffering and witnessing emerges in multiple forms: an inclination to view violence on media and popular culture, engagement in dark tourism, sharing photos and posts of vulnerability on social media, and an increasing interest in reading and watching stories of survival and victimization. This problematic stance locates *human rights consumers* in an ambivalent spatial relation with the distance others. While mostly white, Western, educated consumers have a thirst for having a first-hand experience of violence and suffering, they maintain a safe distance between themselves and distant others simultaneously.

Human rights narrations provide an ambiguous spatial relationship to Western audiences. On the one hand, by approximating stories of victimization and suffering, writers attract attention to human rights abuses elsewhere and by witnessing that incident, readers are expected to generate compassionate responses. As the photo of Aylan Kurdi is shared widely, an immediate and an empathetic bond between us and the object of victimization is created. On the other hand, this connection is a simulated one since it is delivered through a third party, a remote medium – be it social media or storytelling - and it maintains a safe distance between the victim and the audience.

Likewise, theatre posits a similar idea of performance and imitation on stage. Theatre goers are intrigued by the events and actions put on stage and feel compelled by them with the knowledge that what is happening is being staged; a simulated reality is being displayed. Theatre employs the very same ambivalent spatial relation that witnessing human rights atrocities has in common. As Carol Martin states, “[t]he bona fide and the counterfeit, the authentic and the forged, the real and the fake continue to be close partners” (13). The self-referentiality inherent in dramatic literature focuses on this very same tendency to remain at a safe distance and yet to be close to the site of suffering at the same time.

In my book, I utilize the immediacy of theatre and discuss this concept of ambivalent spatial relation that human rights abuses and theatre have in three aspects: 1) how gender-based violence is performed and simulated on stage, 2) the ways in which humanitarian travel and dark tourism maintain a safe distance to the female traveler, 3) the self's engagement with the distant other's testimony of survival. Thanks to these spatial distinctions between distance and proximity, the self and the other, real and fiction, home and abroad, I argue, contemporary plays on witnessing and humanitarianism displace the Western viewers in an ambiguity in which they strive to change the theatrical space into a stable place or to despatialize the space – recall Michel de Certeau – in order to create an empathic bond with the distant other. In this presentation, however, I am going

1. Michelle Baran lists these four dark tourism sites as being the most popular ones in “Dark Tourism” (20).

to particularly focus on the ambiguity of witnessing and the ambivalent spatial distance that theatre goers and witnesses share in common by providing specific examples from contemporary plays. The first part of the paper focuses on the intricate relationship between Western self and the distant other and the ways in which their interaction necessitates an ambivalent spatial relation in which they maintain a safe distance to one another. The second section discusses this ambivalence in self's spatial relation to the distant other in regards to Turkish theatre ensemble *Dostlar Tiyatrosu*'s staging (and adapting) of Matei Visniec's *Migraants* in Istanbul. As the plights of Syrian refugees in Istanbul are being performed, the secular and urban elite audience are forced to re-conceptualize their biased view of the refugees and to re-spatialize Istanbul as a sanctuary as opposed to their concept of the city as one of the most chaotic cities to live.

I. Self's Approximation to the Distant Other

In "*Violence: Six Ways Reflections*" Slavoj Žižek highlights the distance that one maintains to their neighbor, reveals the social-constructed nature of this relationship and explicates one's capacity to bear the other as long as he maintains his distance from the self. He writes: "The tortured subject is no longer a Neighbor, but an object whose pain is neutralized, reduced to a property that has to be dealt with in a rational utilitarian calculus" (45). Through the objectification of the other, the self, according to Žižek, is protected from getting into a close contact with the other. Moreover, he furthers states: "Today's liberal tolerance towards others, the respect of otherness and openness towards it, is counterpointed by an obsessive fear of harassment. In short, the Other is just fine, but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive, insofar as this Other is not really other. ... My duty to be tolerant towards the Other effectively means that I should not get too close to him, intrude on his space. In other words, I should respect his *intolerance* of my over-proximity" (41). Žižek's emphasis on proximity clearly marks the distance that should be kept between the self and the other within contemporary context. In that sense, theatrical productions play a significant role in reshuffling this safe distance between the self and the other as they both share the same location but take on different roles through acting.

On another level, the safe distance that one wishes to maintain towards the other is also considered to empower the individual with a more effective and genuine compassion and to prevent the so-called compassion fatigue. In her definition of compassion fatigue, Susan Moeller places the role of humanitarianism as such: "[Compassion fatigue] is at the base of many of the complaints about the public's short attention span, the media's peripatetic journalism, the public's boredom with international news, the media's preoccupation with crisis coverage. ... Compassion fatigue abets Americans' self-interest" (2). Thanks to the display of victimization through a third medium, visual images of suffering delivered from a distance tend to feed more interest and empathy among the consumers. This safe distance is what draws the human rights consumer's attention and enables them to be closer to the site of suffering. Ironically, the safe distance that is established between

the site of suffering and home precipitates the Western self to literally travel to the site to have an authentic experience.

Dark tourism and travelling to sites of suffering not only compels the Western self to take action, but also prevents her from compassion fatigue. It is through their encounter with the other in his native land that they feel the urge to intervene. Through the act of traveling, the proximity between the self and the distant other takes a novel shape. On the one hand, they are literally closer to the other. On the other hand, her status as a tourist, not a local, allows her to maintain a safe distance to the atrocity and its aftermath. To have the possibility of returning to a safe homeland is what gives a humanitarian traveler that relief to be near to the site of suffering. As Foley and Lennon underline, “the politics, economics, sociologies and technologies of the contemporary world are as much important factors in the events upon which this dark tourism is focused as they are central to the selection and interpretation of sites and events which become tourism products” (3). Aylan Kurdi’s photo debunks the paradigm in this dilemma in which his presence shattered this exotic experience of a beach vacation in Turkey when tourists woke up to see his dead corpse on the beach. Similarly, in French-American playwright Catherine Filloux’s plays, a similar interest in visiting the dark and gruesome details are at work. In *Killing the Boss*, for instance, the American playwright, Eve, a semi-autobiographical character, who travels to Cambodia to teach playwriting, stands out as a tourist woman, who is engaged in dark tourism. Likewise, Devrim in *The Beauty Inside* is enticed to visit her client Yalova, a young girl is sexually abused in her southeastern Turkish village and escapes an honor killing. Although Devrim and Yalova are two young women who are born and raised in the same country, their being worlds apart, Devrim, a Westernized woman from Istanbul, and Yalova, a country girl from southeastern Turkey, labels their encounter as a semi-touristic encounter in which one party maintains her superiority to the other.

In his article on purposeful otherness in *The Darker Side of Travel*, Tony Seaton locates the Western tourist’s fascination with the other in self-interest and explains the underlying reasons beneath a tourist’s infatuation of the other:

This brief escape [the tourist’s temporary release from his/her own cultural identity through contact with the othered] is a safe one, since like the western traveler and anthropologist in the past, the tourist, having experienced a release from everyday self into a world of temporary Otherness, returns with his/her identity confirmed and intact. ... The tourist’s quest for the Other may be seen as self-indulgence, ... an exercise in self-exploration and individuation by contrast and comparison with the perceived Otherness of indigenous populations encountered abroad. (78)

Seaton argues that this act of self-indulgence ignores the detrimental effects on humanitarianism and connects this motivation to the neo-imperialist tendencies of the West to keep the other at a distance so that his privileged position is sustained.

In *Distant Suffering*, Luc Boltanski underscores the newly changing role of theatre in this act of bearing witness to distant suffering. Making a clear-cut distinction between the roles of the actor and the spectator in early modern drama versus contemporary drama, he argues: “From anywhere, the new spectator observes the actors and their spectators both of whom are involved in a common scene since the actors know themselves to be observed by the spectators and the spectators know that they know this. He is not absorbed by what takes place on the stage in that state of ‘participation’ or ‘identification’ so often described in the innumerable commentaries arising from the ambiguous notion of ‘catharsis.’ Nor does he identify or thrill with the other spectators, but instead keeps control of his emotions” (26). It is this newly-adopted role of the spectator and his anti-cathartic stance to the site of suffering that makes theatre align with witnessing and proximity to suffering. Dramatic action along with metatheatrical devices help the audience to be liberated from the boundaries of a cathartic experience and locate them in the middle of this ambiguity of witnessing. This close affinity between witnessing atrocities in theatre and the urge to know more about human rights abuses, dark tourism sites, sites of suffering, and the suffering of the distant other is further explored in contemporary plays. To name a few examples, Catherine Filloux’s *Silence of God*, Gillian Plowman’s *Yours Abundantly, From Zimbabwe*, Christine Evans’ *Trojan Barbie*, and Sonja Linden’s *I Have Before Me a Remarkable Document Given to Me by a Young Lady from Rwanda*, Eve Ensler’s *Necessary Targets* all utilize metatheatrical tools to pinpoint this ambivalent spatial distance and the spectator’s role in reconceptualizing the theatrical space into a site of suffering.

II. Re-figuring Istanbul as a site of refuge in *Dostlar Tiyatrosu*’s *Migraants*

Turkish playwright, actor, and director Genco Erkal’s *Dostlar Tiyatrosu*, a theatre ensemble that was founded in 1969 in Istanbul, is renown for its leftist and political productions and its adaptations from Bertolt Brecht and Turkish communist poet Nazim Hikmet. In line with the changing socio-political dynamics in the last decade in Turkey, the audience of Erkal’s productions have become the newly-marginalized secular urban elites, who oppose Erdogan’s dictatorial regime. Although his company was previously considered to be fringe and non-conformist, his new audience is now the former mainstream and newly marginalized Turkish elite. Having lost his theatrical space due to urban transformation projects orchestrated by the government, he and his company tour the secular and anti-Erdoganist sections of Istanbul where they almost take refuge from the outer world that is filled with religion, autocracy, and bigotry.

In 2017-2018 season, he adapted and staged French-Romanian playwright Matei Visniec’s *Migraants* portraying the plight of Syrian refugees in Istanbul. Organized in small vignettes from their lives in the fringes of the city along with their interactions with smugglers and city dwellers, the play delineates a darker side of Syrian refugee problem that the majority of Erkal’s audience has been unaware of. Some of these anecdotes include an elderly woman seeking her grandson’s cemetery in the Aegean coast, two refugees fleeing from their mercenary smuggler, two prostitutes

trying to make their ends meet at a brothel in Istanbul, a young man who is being convinced by organ traffickers to pay off his debts through organ donation. With real-life images and videos of refugees being screened while the actors play their roles, the spectators are almost forced to witness +how a group of people whom they have so far ignored and called with derogatory terms actually live side by side in their city. Erkal's inclusion of real-life video footages shatters their widespread misconceptions about the Syrian refugees of being lazy, of having a vacation in Turkey, of receiving social security that is twice more than a Turkish national.

Dostlar Tiyatrosu's production has two remarkable roles in challenging the spectator's witnessing the distant other. First and foremost, by delineating the predicament of refugees in Istanbul and combining them with documentary drama tools, it disputes the common prejudices against the Syrians in Istanbul. In the last decade, Genco Erkal and his theatre have become the champion of the secular urban elite and the emblem of anti-Erdoganism through their resistance to government's policies and political plays. However, his real-life depictions of Syrian refugees in Istanbul challenged his audience, who is inclined to categorize Syrian refugees as followers and potential advocates of Erdogan, and denote them as *lazy, dark, mercenary, rapist, traitor, a parasite*.² Erkal's outstanding staging combined with the metathetical tools he used debunk the paradigm of a well-off Syrian refugee who feeds off the resources of the country and occasionally takes a touristic vacation to Syria.

Last but not least, by adapting the play to contemporary Istanbul (thus underscoring that Syrian refugees are actually neighbors to the audience) and by portraying Istanbul as a site of sanctuary, Erkal accentuates the city as a site of a shared space that could embrace empathy, diversity and multiculturalism. Recognizing their proximity to their neighbors, the audience inevitably re-spatializes Istanbul as a haven rather than a chaotic city, from which the secular urban elite dreams migrating. The theatrical space, which highlights both parties proximity to one another, enables a reconfiguring of the neighbors. In Emma Willis's words, theatrical space precipitates this awareness of one's engagement with the distant other and his suffering. She writes:

An ethics of spectatorship to such sights might be said to begin with the acknowledgment that, despite an arrival that is never completed, and a lack of presence, we are nonetheless located within a shared ethical space. That is, by our own emplacement – our appearance – we acknowledge our responsibility towards the disappeared, towards those who have exited. Furthermore, by our presence we are dramaturgically implicated in the ethical and representational breaches that mark the sites. (Willis 8)

Through a similar shared space that *Dostlar Tiyatrosu* provided for its audience, this ambivalent spatial relation between the elite Istanbulites who begin to acknowledge their neighbors and the

2. These are some of the derogatory terms that are frequently used for Syrian refugees in Turkey.

actors playing the role of the Syrian refugees is further highlighted as real-life images intervene and through the sharing of the same theatrical sphere.

III. Conclusion

Aylan Kurdi's photo became an icon for suffering and precipitated an unforeseen social media activism, in which many users shared this image of vulnerability in September 2015. As the majority of Western social media users were busy with feeling sorry for him, a Hungarian journalist and a camerawoman, Petra Laszlo tripped a Syrian refugee named Osama Abdul Mohsen, who was carrying his seven-year old child Zaid as he was fleeing from the police on the border on September 8, 2015, only six days after Aylan's death. Though the video footage of her racist and malign act somewhat surprised the many, it also proved the far-right and xenophobic nature of the individuals, who might seemingly be interested in familiarizing themselves with the distant others, but are willing and ready to push them back on the moment they enter the territory of the self.

In *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*, Lilie Chouliaraki coins the term "the ironic spectator" to define the Western spectator who is interested in vulnerable others (2). She underscores the ironic predicament of bearing witness to an atrocity done to the others. Furthermore, she explicates strong connections among the spectral aspect of witnessing others and theatre. By focusing on the different versions of social media such as Youtube and Twitter, she argues that "the planetary connectivity of the new media have now turned the world into a new *theatrum mundi* – a theatre whose moralizing force lies in the fact that we do not passively watch distant others but we can also enter their own reality as actors" (16). In a similar vein, *Dostlar Tiyatrosu's* 2018 production and adaptation of *Migraants*, creates a *theatrum mundi* in which the citizens of Istanbul acknowledge their new neighbors and are asked to extend their sympathies beyond that of a remote medium. Their sharing the same ethical space in a theatre reflects on their co-existence in the same city, which they have neglected so far. Thus, through the act of witnessing that occurs in the play, the spectators no longer witness the distant other, but rather aim to become a part of their lives by re-thinking their city and its citizens.

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