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# The Intersectionality of Performing Bodies: Dance and the Afghan Refugee Experience

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This article explores from an intersectional perspective how difference gains meaning through musicking, especially dancing bodies. It introduces intersectionality as a means of analysis in ethnomusicology, referring to fieldwork with Afghan refugees in Austria. I examine the preconditions of forced migration and diasporic life realities of Afghans in Austria, specifically focusing on the interdependency of anti-Muslim racism and gender policies. After roughly sketching an Afghan music history, I discuss Afghan pop music in the context of forced migration and present diasporic transformations with reference to social dance events. Finally, I address the interrelatedness of gender, sexuality, and dance by analysing performing bodies and their movements as corporeal signifiers of gender and sexuality as well as of race and ethnic "Otherness." While showing how music and dance help in negotiating a sense of belonging within the web of origin, migration, and relocation, this article emphasises the role of gender and sexuality as well as that of racialisation and ethnicization in both the music and dance practices of Afghans in Vienna and in general public discourse.

## Introduction

In August 2021, roughly two decades after the end of the first Taliban regime, the Taliban regained power over Afghanistan. The international media outcry was intense but did not last long. At first, tragic images illustrated many Afghans' fears of the new old regime: human beings falling from departing airplanes at Kabul airport on 15 August 2021 were shown on all major news channels around the world. A few months later, however, international attention decreased. More than two years after, the situation for Afghans living under the Taliban seems to be of vanishing relevance to international foreign policy.

After taking over the country in 2021, the Taliban set about trying to create the impression that they had changed. They vowed to pursue moderate policies and to uphold human rights, especially women's rights. A year later, it is obvious that these were empty promises. Within the Taliban, the "most extreme of the extreme" have prevailed (Feroz 2023: n.p.), resulting in the persecution of minorities and political opponents, and allowing for drastic discrimination towards women and girls, most prominently their prohibition from pursuing education and work. Similar to the Taliban's official music ban in 1996 (see Baily 2001, 2016), music and dance face severe restrictions today. The Taliban have closed all music education institutions, burned musical instruments, and erased public music practice in general. Subsequently, musicians have fled the country en masse.

But even prior to the horrors of the current regime, the political situation in Afghanistan was rather difficult. Refugees had been consistently leaving the country, with a particularly high level of migration to Europe occurring in the summer of 2015. In this article, I focus on Afghan music and dance in Vienna, foregrounding the city's relatively new Afghan community, while at times

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presenting cross-regional European references. The article is based on fieldwork with Viennese Afghans, work that I started in early 2016 with a research project on the musical identities of young refugees, primarily Afghans (see Kölbl 2018). Since 2018, the fieldwork has focused on the musical scenes and working conditions of musicians within the Afghan community in Vienna, following a participatory model of dialogical knowledge production with long-time research partners (for a detailed reflection on the fieldwork process, see Kölbl 2021). Friendships that I have formed with some of the fieldwork partners who took part in the initial research project are crucial to the thoughts and considerations in this article.

While the paper builds upon valuable anglophone ethnomusicological sources on Afghan music, most notably the UK- and US-based research of John Baily (2001, 2016), Veronica Doubleday (1999, 2006), Mark Slobin (1974, 1976), and Hiromi Sakata (2002, 2013),[1] it forges a new approach, looking at the specifics of European diasporic musicking and dancing in the twenty-first century through an intersectional lens.

## Intersectional Analysis in Ethnomusicology – Theoretical Considerations

Difference has always played a central role in ethnomusicology. Foregrounding the plurality of musical traditions globally, the study of the musics of the world relies on difference. How, though, do music and dance researchers conceptualise and theorise difference? As ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong (2006) argues, the discipline has been "somewhat reluctant to engage with critical approaches to difference" – approaches that she regards as well-established in comparable disciplines (ibid.: 259). Next to ethnicity – which clearly constitutes a foundational analytical category within the discipline – certain kinds of difference enjoy greater attention than others, with religion and class featuring most prominently. Besides, in ethnomusicological research, difference often appears as monolithic, focused on one singular category. The interdependency of categories of difference – intersectionality – still ranked as a rather insignificant form of analysis in ethnomusicology as recently as 2015 (Wong 2015). This changed in the following years, especially after the re-actualisation of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020.[2] Discussions around decolonising ethnomusicology in particular are now making use of intersectional theory (see Tan 2021). However, aside from in the field of "critical ethnomusicology of race" where, as Maureen Mahon (2019) argues, intersectionality is frequently used "explicitly or implicitly" (ibid.: 105), the concept remains exceptional in general ethnomusicological theoretical discourse.

Throughout the wider humanities, however, intersectionality now constitutes a paradigm. With its origins in black feminism and critical race theory, the concept of intersectionality initially focused on the triad of gender, race, and class (Crenshaw 1989). It redefined the hitherto monocausal understanding of gender held by white Western feminisms and contested the unmarked-ness of multiple discrimination. Three decades later, intersectionality comprises a variety of approaches within diverse fields of analysis. For this article, I develop an understanding of intersectionality that relates to ethnomusicology and specifically to performing – musick-

1 The work of these authors has been treated as a canonical body of ethnomusicological literature on Afghan music. The authors conducted fieldwork in Afghanistan in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in valuable material documenting various musical traditions of the country. The work of Afghan music scholars did not enter anglophone discourse on Afghan music due to the language barrier but also, I argue, due to the epistemic exclusion of scholarship from the Global South. A recent publication in English and Dari (Küppers and Bleier 2016) and events foregrounding Afghan scholars and musicians (see Lell 2023) try to combat this representational dilemma.

2 Notable recent contributions to ethnomusicological discourse on intersectionality include Kyle DeCoste's (2017) research on New Orleans female brass bands, Patricia Shehan Campbell's (2020) work on ethnomusicology and music education, and Deonte L. Harris' (2022) reimagination of ethnomusicology along anti-racist lines. It is striking that the vast majority of ethnomusicological work on intersectionality is produced in the US.

ing and dancing – bodies. The paper traces how music and dance practices are inseparable from performing bodies, and how performing bodies are inseparable from intersectional categories. In including points of critique on academic uses of intersectionality, I hope to further intersectional perspectives on performing bodies, embodiment, and corporeality in music and dance. I illustrate the theoretical discussion with empirical research on music and dance among Afghan refugees in Austria, drawing on my own fieldwork. My use of the term "refugee experience" harnesses Adelaida Reyes' (1999) conceptualisation of lived realities of forced migration. Afghans in Austria are labelled as refugees in various social and political settings, and being put in this box comes on top of experiences of war and traumatic migration.

The concept of intersectionality considers social categories like gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, religion, ability, education, nationality, and numerous others as 'intersecting' – that is, overlapping and inseparable. These categories name social inequalities and help position the "gendered lives" of researchers and their "friends and teachers," as Deborah Wong (2015: 178) formulates the constellations of humans involved in ethnographic research. However helpful it is in communicating the positionalities within these constellations, intersectionality does not only serve as a formula for describing a set of categories. Instead, for the purposes of this article, intersectionality becomes a frame for analysing music and dance: an analytical tool for discovering how performing bodies are always tied to social categories. This analytical tool is political as it is inherently queer-feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial, and it implies social critique (Erel et al. 2007). An intersectional perspective not only helps highlight the non-normative, marginalised, and oppressed, but it also brings attention to positions that are usually taken for granted, dismantling unmarked normative structures and their socially regulative power.

Relating these thoughts to the human body and to movement in the performance of music and dance, I argue that intersectional categories come into effect on two levels. On the first level, performing bodies display categories of difference in a symbolic representational sense: bodies that make music and dance represent categories of difference through their gendered, racialised, ethnicized etc. appearance. Further, the way that bodies perform in time and space not only points to categories of difference but also helps to create these categories and to render them legible in a performative sense. On the other level, embodied individuals are bound to live according to these categorisations: gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, class etc. constitute concrete lived realities. To 'be' a set of social categories – e.g. to be Black, to be a woman, to be Muslim – predefines a position within hegemonic power relations. Social acts like performing music and dance not only present a certain set of social categories, but the intersection of this set of social categories constitutes the very possibilities of acting in this world. In other words, a body's possibilities are bound to its matter, and the body's reception cannot dispense with prior political meaning.

It is useful to acknowledge how some categories – race, age, ability, and gender, among others – are perceived through the body's materiality. The visibility of certain social categories makes it impossible for "visible minorities" to escape, for instance, a "racist, ableist or transphobic gaze" (Susemichel and Kastner 2018: 56).[3] Referring to ethnomusicological fieldwork, Catherine M. Appert and Sidra Lawrence (2020) stress "how sexed, gendered, and raced bodies are differently visible – and therefore surveilled, immobilized, or endangered" in different ways (ibid.: 232). Pierre Bourdieu's characterisation of ethnic identity as a "*percipi*, a being-perceived" through

3 Original in German: "Sogenannte sichtbare Minderheiten, die aufgrund ihrer physischen Erscheinung keinerlei Möglichkeiten haben, z.B. einem rassistischen, behinderteinfeindlichen oder transfeindlichen Blick zu entkommen …" (Susemichel and Kastner 2018).

skin colour or names (Bourdieu 1998: 104) follows a similar logic, although ethnicity may not necessarily be visible. While bodies, clothes, and looks can signify ethnicity, cultural expressions often render ethnicity visible and audible. Likewise, other categories, such as sexuality, nationality, class, and religion, to name just a few, may become legible through moving, performing, and sounding, as I argue in this article.

The casual reciting of categories of difference, detached from human bodies and presented from a hitherto unsolicited positionality (I discuss my own positionality below), displays theoretical difficulties. First, the itemisation of various social categories of difference runs the risk of becoming a mere exercise, a bare listing of categories instead of a thorough exploration of their interplay. Secondly, it becomes apparent that any list of categories is not exhaustive. A basic critique of academic uses of intersectionality is that the listing of categories needs additions like 'among others,' and 'et cetera' – additions that hint at a failure to be complete. Following Judith Butler (1990), however, this failure is instructive, as it is exhaustive and illimitable at the same time.

I further critique the invocation and differentiation of categories and thus the very categorisation of social difference. In other words, putting categories into language results in their fixation and implies their very creation. We actually need a certain positionality in order to be able to speak about categories, to identify and differentiate them. And this position, following lann hornscheidt (2014),[4] is inevitably normative and centric. Postcolonial feminist theorists Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan (2009) criticise the fact that it is mostly white academics with secured positions and exclusive institutionalised networks that use intersectional theory. A buzzword with growing popularity in academia, intersectionality also enables the institutionalised and personal self-assurance of white privileged researchers, as lann hornscheidt (2014) argues.

How then can intersectional thought be critically reconsidered in order for it to be helpful for ethnomusicological inquiry? I argue that ethnomusicological topics are inextricably linked to intersectionality since ethnomusicological research often concerns musics and dances displaying a marginal position within cultural hegemonies. Differences – their relations, interplays, and interdependencies – precondition music and dance. I consider it essential to name, foreground, and explore these differences. This, however, must not result in creating lists of fixed identities. Intersections are necessarily messy, chaotic, and heterodox because intersections are not about identity, as Roderick Ferguson (2004) argues from the perspective of a queer-of-colour critique. An intersectional approach must not invoke and create stable identities, but rather "debunk the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality are discrete formations, apparently insulated from one another" (ibid.: 4). An intersectional analysis thereby dismantles how these intersections are constantly concealed.

Similarly, education and gender scholar Katharina Walgenbach (2012) advocates focusing on the interdependency *of* categories – that is, essentially interdependent categories per se – instead of analysing the interdependency *between* categories. Regarding terminology, 'interdependency' seems more effective in indicating the respective dependence of social categories than 'intersectionality', as it foregrounds the complex correlations of hegemonic dominance (ibid.). Regarding migration specifically, it is impossible to adequately analyse one social category without another, as migration researcher and queer theorist Fatima El Tayeb (2003) notes with respect to the interdependency of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity (ibid.: 129).

4 lann hornscheidt prefers their name to be written with initial letters in lower case.

Engaging with intersectionality and interdependency on a theoretical level, as I have done up to this point, however, leaves us detached from lived realities, from experiences of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and other forms of exclusion. Whose bodies, which individuals, and what kind of lived realities are we dealing with? These questions are central to an interdependent approach, as are reflections on my own positionality within the research. My ethnic minority identity as a Burgenland Croat[5] and my open self-understanding in terms of gender and sexuality surely precondition my interests and approaches. Simultaneously, I am bound to a perception as a majority Austrian. I am white, my body is read as male, I represent majoritarian positions in terms of education, religious socialisation, academic profession, and (not least) nationality, resident status, and an upbringing in peace.

## Afghan Refugees in Austria and the Complex Interdependencies of Anti-Muslim Racism

Since the mid-twentieth century, Afghanistan has been shaped by wars inciting migrations to various parts of the world, against the backdrop of different political rules in effect at various times. To give a very rough chronical overview: after a coup at the beginning of the 1970s, the constitutional monarchy was replaced by a brutal dictatorship. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 led to the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s. Then, the Taliban regime in the mid-1990s was met with the US invasion in the early 2000s. Until the summer of 2021, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was a democracy, albeit one of poor political stability – Daesh and the Taliban violently controlled large areas, and attacks and bombings were regular occurrences. In August 2021, the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan, re-actualising the trauma of the 1990s.

At the end of 2021, Afghanistan was the country with the third highest number of refugees worldwide (UNHCR 2022). And over the last 40 years, Afghans have constituted the biggest group of refugees around the world (UNHCR 2015). Afghanistan's neighbouring countries Pakistan and Iran host about 95 percent of the Afghan refugees, an estimated 6 million people in total. Especially noteworthy is the Taliban's terror regime from 1995 to 2001, which incited a major exodus, specifically in the field of music and the arts. The ban on music greatly inhibited musical practice, with the forbidding of instruments and recordings as well as dancing – with one exception, Taliban 'chants' (see Baily 2001, 2016). After the first Taliban regime, music became a symbol of freedom. However, music's associations with immorality from a religious perspective – associations also tied to gender restrictions and ideas of the sexual modesty of women – bears continued effects.

Large-scale migration from Afghanistan to many countries in Central Europe is a relatively new phenomenon. While countries like Germany and the United Kingdom already became home to large Afghan communities after 1978, the migrations of the summers of 2015 and 2016 contributed considerably to the formation of notable Afghan communities in countries like Austria and Sweden. The "long summer of migration" in 2015 represents a temporary collapse in Europe's racist and classist border regime (Hess, Kasparek, and Kron 2016) – an exceptional migration movement almost unthinkable only a few years later in times of an even more restrictive European mobility order. During this long summer of migration, the largest group of asylum seekers in Austria were Afghans, the majority of whom were male unaccompanied minors. As

5 The Burgenland Croats are an ethnic minority group in the South-Eastern Austrian province of Burgenland. The migration dates back to the sixteenth century, and the Burgenland Croatian language developed independently in this new homeland. While everyday discrimination of Burgenland Croats has decreased since the late twentieth century and the group is granted full minority rights in legal terms, legal inequality and ethnic Othering are still persistent.

of 2023, around 50,000 Afghans constitute the biggest Asian community in the country. While a large part of this community was threatened by negative decisions on asylum applications, withdrawal of subsidiary protection status, and deportations to Afghanistan by plane until the summer of 2021, Afghans momentarily cannot be expelled to Afghanistan. Still, right up to today, Afghans in Austria face serious denunciation in public discourse, harsh structural inequality, and severe individual discrimination in everyday life.

The media plays a central role in these dynamics of Othering. Typical headlines in Austrian tabloids present killings, rape, and sexual violence as an intrinsically Afghan problem – often referring to suspected crimes rather than actual convictions. By covering crime, and by sensationalising sexual crimes in particular, private and public media have established a prescribed image of 'the Afghan refugee' alongside specific intersectional categories: young, male, uneducated, poor, heterosexual, potentially sexually violent, hence also sexually potent, potentially criminal, and Muslim. While the demographic structure of the Afghan asylum seeker group since 2015 does indeed show a prevalence of young men under the age of 25 in a precarious economic situation with little to no access to education, their sexualisation and criminalisation is disconcerting. As a study on the representation of nationality in crime reporting proves, press attention to Afghans is disproportionate to actual crime convictions (Gaigg et al. 2019). Afghans' nationality, their asylum status, enforced unemployment, and especially their religion, Islam, are further components of this negative image. The complex interdependency of numerous categories of difference creates the Muslim Other and results in an uncomplex anti-Muslim and anti-Afghan racism in Europe.

In relation to bodies and bodily appearance, the look of young Afghans – for example, their fashion and hairstyle choices – is not to be underestimated when considering the dynamics of discrimination in everyday life. Afghans are 'detected as Other' through looks and thus gain visibility and meaning in social space. Intertwined with looks are racist imaginaries of South Asian bodies, even though Afghanistan's ethnic and racial diversity actually undermines racial stereotypes. This extreme Othering in everyday life transgresses the political sphere and pertains to the social space in particular. This phenomenon of course is not new. It is historically documented in relation to other ethnically marked migrant groups in Europe as, for example, Bülent Diken (1998) argues in the case of Turkish immigrants and their negative image in 1990s Germany.

The distinct discursive linking of Arab and South Asian Muslim migrants and male sexuality, however, constitutes a more recent development. Referring to media representation of incidents of sexual assaults during the New Year celebrations in Cologne in 2015, Gabriele Dietze (2016) calls attention to the ways that the image of Muslim migrant men is linked to sexual deviancy and to gender-related backwardness – phenomena declared not only harmful but dangerous to white women. Dietze speaks of *ethnosexism* as the "culturalisation of gender that discriminates against ethnically marked people because of their position within a seemingly problematic or 'backward' sexuality or sexuality order" (ibid.: 4).[6] Since the summer of migration in 2015, this specific intersectionality of anti-migration stances (ibid.) has ruled over how politics and media portray Muslim migrants and how gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, class, and geopolitical positionality play into denigration and rejection. The "racialized sexuality" of Muslim refugees implies a deviant and dangerous sexuality, one of "foreign" men, correlating with the depiction of Muslim women as "passive and silent victims of their culture" (El-Tayeb 2011: xiiv). Within the dis-

6 Original in German: "Ethnosexismus wird hier als eine Art von Kulturalisierung von Geschlecht verstanden, die ethnisch markierte Menschen aufgrund ihrer angeblich besonderen, problematischen oder ‚rückständigen' Sexualität oder Sexualordnung diskriminiert" (Dietze 2016: 4).

course on Muslim Otherness, "... seemingly paradoxically, gender and sexuality take center positions, while religion remains comparatively marginal," as Fatima El-Tayeb notes (ibid.: 81). The proclaimed incompatibility of Islam and Europe obviously is not based on religion, but rather on gender policies and their representational meanings.

Critiquing ethnosexist discourse, however, does not imply denying discrimination against women, girls, and non-normative gender identities in Afghanistan and within Afghan communities. The Taliban's patriarchal, marriage-centred, and reproduction-based gender policy has fostered oppression and thus the invisibility of women and girls, reducing their social possibilities right up to the present day. Even before the Taliban regime, however, strict gender segregation, women's isolation within the domestic sphere, and their dependence on male relatives shaped social structures. These inequalities call for an acknowledgment of feminist efforts in Afghanistan and within Afghan communities abroad (some of which I will address in this paper) and an understanding of gender views as unsteady and transforming – especially in diasporic situations. In this article, I focus on individual gender agency instead of entering debates fuelled by accusations of collective misbehaviour.

## From Radio Afghanistan to *Afghan Star* – Music Histories

Afghan music is inseparable from diasporic life. The musical exodus during the first Taliban regime offers the most striking example. As John Baily (2005, 2016) has discussed in detail, exile in Pakistani cities like Peshawar and Islamabad enabled a vital continuation of Afghan music practice when music in Afghanistan was forced to stay silent. Likewise, Iran served, and still serves, as a space for Afghan music and musicians, with Mashad and Teheran constituting the main sites of practice (Baily 1999b, 2016). The musical life of Afghans in Canada and the US, and not least in Europe, adds to this global picture of Afghan music practice (Baily 1999b, 2005, 2014). As I learned during fieldwork, the Afghan diaspora in Europe today draws from a pan-European network of musicians, music producers, and film producers, not only providing their local diasporic communities with musical outputs but also constituting a relevant musical impulse for their country of origin, Afghanistan (see Kölbl 2022).

In order to discuss the music genre, Afghan pop, that is most important in the diaspora context, I will briefly sketch Afghan music's development and stylistic diversity. Alongside classical musical genres, influenced by North Indian Hindustani classical music and Persian poetry, there are diverse local musical traditions (*musiqi mahali*) reflecting Afghanistan's linguistic and cultural heterogeneity. Baily (1994) stresses the relevance of traditional Pashtu music in forming the basis for "Afghan national music" (ibid.: 53). Considering Afghanistan's multi-ethnic makeup, Radio Afghanistan was crucial for developing a specific sound for an emerging national identity and consequently the creation of a "pan-ethnic, distinctively Afghan society" (Slobin 1974: 148). From the 1950s until the late 1970s, Radio Afghanistan – the country's musical centre – formed a "bastion of modernism," significantly improving the reputation of music and of musicians (Baily 2001: 18). In these times of the "heyday of music in Afghanistan" (Baily 1999a: 810), Pashtu traditional music and Hindustani music theory fostered a popular music style that formed the basis for contemporary Afghan pop music. Initially, the music in the new popular style was oriented towards classical and regional traditional styles. From the mid-1970s onward, the inclusion of elements of 'Western' popular music, as well as the influence of neighbouring Pakistani, Indian, Iranian, and Tajik popular music and movie soundtracks, increased (Baily 2001: 17).

Baily (2005) stresses that during the communist era of the 1980s, "[p]opular music in Kabul became increasingly Westernized and modernized" (ibid.: 215). This development led to the emergence of a distinct ethno-pop tradition that resembles similar folk-pop forms of not only South Asia, but also West Asia and the Balkans with regard to their function and significance within national musical life. Although Afghanistan's recent history certainly carved out exceptionally difficult conditions for music making and the music market, Afghan pop music production and its marketing inside and outside of the country corresponds to what Motti Regev (2007) calls "Ethno-national Pop-Rock" (ibid.: 319). Distinct Afghan musical features, in the area of melodic material and in certain dance rhythms, join musical characteristics of "Anglo-American pop-rock" like its beats and harmonisation (ibid.). Pop-rock-associated instruments such as electronic keyboard, electric guitar, and drum kit mix with traditional musical instruments, like *tablas*, *harmonium*, *rubab*, *dambura*, and *sitar*.

While the forced migrations of the 1990s led to rich musical practices in classical and traditional musical genres in Pakistan and Iran, including in the form of the musical transmission system upheld by *ustads* (masters) (Baily 2016), it is Afghan pop that has taken a central position within the European Afghan communities that formed after the summer of 2015. Up to 2021, Afghan pop was thriving both within Afghanistan and abroad. But since the Taliban seized power again, Afghan pop has happened exclusively outside of Afghanistan. Afghan pop is globally available through online social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Its flourishing was illustrated, for example, by the development of the popular talent show *Afghan Star*. Since this TV programme staged musical performances, presented young singers, and fostered public discourse on music, *Afghan Star*'s function in pre-2021 Afghanistan resembled the importance of Radio Afghanistan described by Baily (2001) for the 1970s and 1980s.

Before the Taliban seized power and stopped the show, it was in its fifteenth season, with an audience reach and popularity that had steadily increased since the premiere of the first season in 2005. Likewise, the studio design and equipment became more and more aligned with ideas of professionalism manifest in TV talent shows across the globe. The specific local adaption within its geopolitical setting, however, had developed into a potential threat to the social system of the time between the Taliban regimes, as Michael Klemm argues (2013: 43). Afghan clerics condemned the show as immoral and against Islam (Constable 2017), something which itself points to the socially transformative power of the musical performances. Talent shows that feature 'non-Western' music touch upon issues like tradition, ethnicity, national identity, and social values much more than their counterparts in the Global North do (see Yang 2017). This musical representation of socio-political dynamics also reached and affected the interested audience outside of Afghanistan. The show was available on the host station Tolo TV's website[7] as well as on YouTube, and it constituted a relevant musical forum for the Afghan diaspora. This is not least because it regularly featured guest appearances by Afghan pop stars from North America and Europe.

The debates around *Afghan Star* are particularly telling when it comes to attitudes towards performing women, more specifically towards their bodies. Female participants were fewer in number than male contestants, but their participation regularly sparked public controversies. Female bodies performing on stage – singing, dancing, not wearing a veil – seem to exasperate religious authorities, but they have also led to rejection within participants' families. As harmful as these condemnations and acts of violence may be to the affected women, they also stimulated public debate on women's rights. Accordingly, Wazmah Osman (2014) argues that female *Afghan*

7 https://afghanstar.tv/

*Star* participants became “media martyrs” through their performing bodies and through the significances their bodies gain on the public screen (ibid.: 883).[8]

This unease with performing female bodies is attributable to a strong tradition of gender segregation, one that relegates virtually all musical activity engaged in by Afghan women to the “privacy of domestic surroundings” (Doubleday 1999: 812). Public music making is traditionally the preserve of men. Even though women occasionally pursued singing careers in the pioneering spirit of Radio Afghanistan’s heyday (see Baily 2001), subsequent political developments – above all, the Taliban’s ban on music and dance and their oppression of women – rendered female musical agency impossible. Underlying social and religious morality continues to have an effect on ideas of female modesty, especially regarding dance practices. Dancing female bodies disturb an androcentric, patriarchal visual regime that prefers to make these bodies invisible so as to deprive the male gaze of (hetero)sexualised content. Due to the alleged non-sexual nature of a same-sex gaze, Afghan dance traditionally involves same-sex dancing only (assuming a heteronormative exclusivity of sexual desire).

## Afghan Music and Dance in Europe – Diasporic Transformations

In diasporic settings in Europe or in the Global North more generally, moral ideas on female dancing persist. However, there are manifold transformations taking place on various levels. A major change that accompanies relocation is that public dancing has become a common form of musical activity within the community. My research partners, most of whom grew up in Afghanistan or Iran, had previously experienced dancing only within private festivities like wedding parties. In contrast, events that target the Afghan community in Vienna constitute frequent occasions for public participatory dance – concerts, DJ performances, club events, etc. arranged by cultural societies or private organisers.

Within these parties, it is an uncontested norm that only men dance. Even though the diasporic setting actually challenges (if not breaks down) gender restrictions, women generally do not dance in front of their male peers. Here, a few factors come into play. In accordance with the demographic predominance of young men among the Afghan community in Austria, male party guests outnumber female ones. In the context of this gender ratio, it might be even harder to transgress existing gender boundaries. On exceptional occasions, though, women do dance in mixed-gender crowds. This, I argue, is linked to these particular female dancers’ interdependent positionality. Gender and bodily agency in dance are obviously related to, and influenced by, not only asylum status and nationality, but more importantly, also length of stay and therefore class position, diasporic identity, religious identification, and education status.

At this point, it is useful to address possible pitfalls in the narrative unfolding above. It is a story of culturally active men and culturally passive women and, when told through an activity like dance, it can also foster a culturalization of migration and fix cultural difference (see Scheibelhofer 2011). Moreover, the transformation of gender relations within Western diasporic

8 It is remarkable how Western narratives not only exoticize the TV show itself but also sensationalise the apparent gender disparity, thus radically Othering Afghan women as passive victims of their culture. A notable example from US popular culture is the movie *Rock the Kasbah* (Levinson 2015). It features Bill Murray playing a shabby music producer from the US who helps a Pashto woman, played by Leem Lubany, to participate in *Afghan Star*. He not only saves her from the Taliban who try to kill her after her TV appearance, but also reconciles her with her enraged father. It is indeed hard to find a more illustrative example of a White old man saving a Brown young Muslim woman and enabling her access to musical expression; this plot overtly narrates a neo-colonial White saviourism and derides *Afghan Star* as a ridiculous and inherently impossible attempt at emulating US talent show culture. The movie is inspired by Havana Marking’s (2009) documentary film *Afghan Star*.

contexts not only nearly reads as implicit and auto-regulatory, but it may also seem indispensable. As Scheibelhofer and Leeb (2019) note in the context of gender transformative work with male Afghan refugees in Austria, the public interest in this work – and I would argue that the same holds true for academic work in the area – is often "fueled by racialized notions of refugees 'importing' a problematic, archaic masculinity and thus needing special education" (ibid.: 130). An intersectional perspective that foregrounds the individual historicity of cultural, social, and religious belonging offers a more nuanced view, uncovering the complex power relations that inform the shaky processes of constructing notions of gender. Accordingly, I define the attitudes towards dance described above as an analysis of social relations – instructive precisely because their transformative potential becomes apparent. Gender views and their transformations are bound to discourses and institutions: they arise in educational contexts or are based on the paradigm of integration, and they are informed by anti-Muslim racism and legal discrimination just as much as they draw from positive notions of family traditions and community values.

The cultural work of my field research partner Sonja Khatera Latifi illustrates the complexities of gender and Afghan diasporic identity in the context of music and dance. Sonja, who had to flee Kabul with her parents at the age of three, runs an event agency that focuses on women-only dance events featuring Afghan pop music. In a fieldwork interview with me in April 2019, she describes the interdependency of family values, her heterosexual marriage, her Austrian education, and her religion, as well as her economic possibilities and necessities, as intersecting factors in forming and transforming her understandings of gender and sexuality. Though she portrays her parents as comparatively liberal, they initially objected to her business plans, asking her how she could "present herself among so many men" (Latifi 2019).[9] They now, however, proudly support her work, as does her husband – a fact to which she attributes great relevance. Her aspiration to create safe dance spaces for Afghan women is very much informed by her own history of gender empowerment. She bears witness to the negative impact of public discourses on Afghans' problematic, "backward" ideas of gender and sexuality – sometimes disguising herself as Turkish to reduce negative stereotyping. During the interview, Sonja emphasises the pressure to which Afghan women in Austria are subjected when recounting her own experiences regarding dance: "We grew up in a culture where it is shameful. If I stand up and start dancing, of course they'll say 'what is she doing?' I cannot change that alone. I need other women to slowly, slowly change this" (Latifi 2019).

Due to Latifi's dedicated work in organising female dance events, Vienna is comparable to other metropolitan centres of the Afghan diaspora in Europe and North America: female-only Afghan concerts are available in all major cities in the UK, in Sweden and Germany, as well as in Canada and the US. These events all follow a similar pattern: no men are allowed inside the concert venue, except for security staff and the musicians performing – quite often the singers are popular male stars. The organisers are also keen to ensure that no video footage leaves the dancing venue, since the women attending not only dance but also often wear glamorous outfits without veils. In online spaces, specifically social media, gender constraints seem to persist, whereas live events enable women to "enjoy the day without fear," as Latifi (2019) puts it. She points out that the women's families ascribe respectability to her events and trust her to ensure their on- and offline privacy, sparing them compromising situations.

9 The original language of the interview was German.

**Figure 1.** Advertisement for a concert with London-based Afghan singer Ajmal Zahin, 8 March 2018 in Vienna. 'Ladies Night' is organised by Sonja Khatera Latifi's event agency, Khatera Events.
Source: Kathera Events Facebook page.

Remembering the first concert put on by her event agency Khatera Events, she says: "I really saw how happy these women were. When they came and thanked me after the concert, when they hugged me, tears came to their eyes" (ibid.). Sonja Khatera Latifi's long-term goal implies a reconsideration of gender stereotyping among her guests: "I want to help the women. I want to enable

women to develop and educate themselves further, to trust themselves" (ibid.). She believes that this social realignment can turn into sustainable changes whereby women become accustomed to dancing among their peers and eventually gender restrictions lose relevance.

## Gender, Sexuality, and Dancing Bodies in Afghan Music

The cultural intelligibility of gender and sexuality relies on the body and gains significance with body movements. Accordingly, dance constitutes a prime site for the creation, transmission, and maintenance of culture-specific understandings of gender and sexuality (see Hanna 2010). A close inquiry into gender, sexuality, and dance in Afghan contexts shows a pronounced connection between performing bodies and sexual meaning. Veronica Doubleday (1999) emphasises that beside the implicit religious and social morals regarding female musical expression, a "climate of covert prostitution surrounds some types of music and dance" (ibid.: 811). She also points to women appearing on stage dancing as "generally classed with prostitutes for seriously flouting social conventions of modesty" (ibid.: 815). Likewise, Baily (2014) emphasises how dancing girls were "morally reprehensible" according to common standards and in the punishments they attracted (ibid.: 110–11). The two morally acceptable states of womanhood, virginity and matrimony, do not allow for female bodies to be seen dancing, precisely because of the connection of dancing female bodies to sexuality and sex work respectively.

An example of an even more complex connection between gender, sexuality, and dance is the infamous practice of dancing boys. The *bacha bazi* (lit. boy play), a dancing boy, performs in female clothes "usually at small private parties" to string instruments *dutar* or *rubab* and percussion instruments *tabla* or *zirbaghali* (Baily 2014: 108). This practice is openly linked to sexual exploitation by adult men – the term *bacha bazi* refers not only to the boy's dance performance but also to the sexual activity after the dance. The dance itself holds highly erotic connotations, with various movements bearing sexual meanings. Baily stresses the importance of the ankle bells, whose sound suggests a proximity to naughtiness and mischievousness (ibid.: 110). The boys, usually around twelve to sixteen years old, are kidnapped or sold, trained as dancers and owned by older men (see Slobin 1976: 116–20; Doran and Healy 2010). The non-consensual and abusive character of these relations is obvious; the UN speaks of them as sex slavery and child trafficking (see Jones 2015). Simultaneously, the cultural history of sexual relations between adult men and adolescent boys in various cultural settings and historical eras, as well as this specific dance's performance aspects and aesthetic principles (see Floor 2008; Baily 2014), are relevant to grasping the phenomenon's complexities.

Still, Western representations of *bacha bazi*, specifically media reports and documentary films, tend to be sensationalist and Orientalising.[10] This tendency in Western representation of deviant sexualities of the Oriental Other also applies to Afghan masculinity in general, and to men who have sex with men especially. Nivi Manchanda (2015) discusses in detail how Western discourses linked to the US invasion of Afghanistan created a pathologized image of the Afghan man, one embedded in an Orientalist, even homonationalist framework.[11] She describes Western depictions of Afghan men as "at once freakishly effeminate and monstrously misogynistic" (ibid.: 1). Manchanda demonstrates how Western discourses on Afghan male sexuality posit same-sex

10 For example the documentary *The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan* (Doran and Healy 2010).

11 In her work on homonationalism, Jasbir Puar (2007) shows how social and political recognition of LGBTQ persons became a barometer in evaluating a nation's political status in terms of their deemed sexual progressivity. Specifically relating to US-American military interventions, like the so called 'War on Terror' in Iraq and Afghanistan, Puar discusses how sexuality dominates narratives on Others and how homonormative Western ideas of sexual identities predefine proper, 'normal', and deviant sexualities.

practices as socially prevalent and culturally dependent, describing how these narratives render Afghan homosexual relations inauthentic because they do not correspond to Western ideas of a gay identity. As important as it is to emphasise the difference between sexual acts, sexual desire, and sexual identity in Muslim contexts (see Massad 2008), the reduction of same-sex practice to mere sexual acts leaves no room for conceptualising the forms of "long term sexual intimacy" that exist in Afghanistan (Manchanda 2015: 8). Failing to do so further fuels the problematic and reductive narrative that homo-sociality and the sexual unavailability of women are the breeding ground for male same-sex desire.

The discursive feminisation of Afghan men in this way also meets Eurocentric perceptions pertaining to the dance movements of young Afghan men in the diaspora. At informal events, their dances are characterised by paired dancing, with dancers' torsos reacting to those of their dance partners, and notable waist movements, alternating foot movements, shoulder movements, the high position of arms, and elaborate finger positioning. It is telling how these movements – the dancing bodies – elicit a scepticism that is related in particular to gender and sexuality. This is illustrated in the following quotation from a female music pedagogue Bianka Wüstehube describing her work with Afghan refugees: "Two men walked into the centre and started dancing and they danced as I have never seen it. My [female] colleague and I were thinking: Are they making fun of us, are they now moving in any manner, are they kidding us?" (cited in Röbke 2020: 138). Although the unfamiliarity is paired with a certain appreciation, this remark shows how body movements are linked to classifications according to gender and, in this case, also ethnic appearance. While at first both music pedagogues were uncertain as to the authenticity of the dance movements, they soon concluded that what they were experiencing actually *is* dance and most likely must be Afghan: "Then the next one joined the circle and we noticed: This actually is a certain repeatable form of movement. It was apparent that they all were moving in a similar way and so authentic and good." She adds that she and her colleague "as women" were not able to achieve this level of dance "movement quality" (ibid.: 138–9).

Such characterisations of dancing Afghans draw on understandings of gendered dancing capabilities in central Europe. I agree that a certain pronounced body knowledge and movement repertoire is apparent with Afghan dancers – all the more remarkable given dance's history of social acceptability in Afghanistan. However, it is striking how gender, and implicitly sexuality again, are at the centre of negotiating ethnic Otherness. The simple fact that two men dance in intimate ways, let alone the various body movements used and their culture-specific coding, seems to inhibit a conceptualisation of body movements that does not rely on preconceived notions of sexuality. These Eurocentric readings of body movements mirror colonial, Orientalist depictions of South Asian masculinity as emasculated and feminine (specifically in terms of the physicality of bodies). They also resemble the post-9/11 imaginations described above – those of a deviant Afghan masculinity conceptualised through heteronormative and homonormative identities of gender and sexuality in the Global North. This theoretical analogy between discourses on Afghan male dance in the context of forced migration and the Orientalist and post-9/11 imaginations of a deviant Afghan masculinity are not at all adopted into the public and political discourse in Europe. On the contrary, the narrative of the hypermasculine, sexually violent Muslim that is prevalent in European media takes its cues from Orientalist traditions of the discursive hypermasculinisation of Arab men.

**Figure 2.** Male dancing crowd at a club event with Heidelberg-based Afghan singer Valy Hedjasi in Vienna discotheque Arena34, April 2017. (Photograph by the author)

John Baily (2014) also documents dance in the Afghan diaspora, and specifically the dances of young Afghan men. Their type of "solo or small group dancing" has been customary at wedding parties in Afghan cities too (ibid.: 113). Baily's description of dancers at an event in London in 2006 strongly recalls images from Vienna's Afghan dancing scene:

> They wore jeans, sports shoes, and danced very much as a couple, interacting with each other though without body contact. The gestures were flirtatious, circling around each other, with clicking fingers and shimmying shoulders. Their foot movements revealed a left-right alternation, but these movements were not exaggerated and not the stamping notions of the dancing boy. (ibid.)

Baily's comparison to the dancing boys points to an important fact. While Eurocentric spectators may have trouble classifying the gendered implications of the dance movements described, these movements are not in themselves signifiers of exceptional sexual or gendered meaning. Rather, they correspond to common heteronormative understandings of male bodies moving to music in the diasporic context. As became apparent in numerous dance events during the fieldwork for this research, male affection, same-sex couple dancing, and "flirtatious gestures" (ibid.) represent 'normal' and normative ways of showing affection between friends and peers – of interacting within the diasporic community. A constant observation in the field, and also my personal experience of dancing with my Afghan friends, is that, for young Afghan men, dancing with each other is a common form of interaction and cultural expression.

Dancing, thus, is neatly tied to the collective, to a diasporic community in the process of aligning its cultural expressions towards a normalisation of dance in its new surroundings. The gender segregation in dance practices in Vienna, and the moral implications of dance for women,

endure while they also adapt to new understandings of gender and sexuality. Here, individual figures of female empowerment play a relevant role with regard to female Afghan dancing. Simultaneously, male Afghan dancing evinces helpful alternatives to stereotypical Western ideas of masculinity. While paradigms of 'integration' – mostly a blunt euphemism for assimilation – highlight the ways Afghan men must work on disposing of their 'backward' and 'savage' understandings of masculinity and male sexuality, the example of dance shows that Afghan masculinities are capable of showing male affection in ways that many men in central Europe cannot even imagine. I argue for a critique of the ethnosexist imperative of 'learning' liberal gender policies as a part of 'integration', and for decentring European sovereignty in defining what progressive stances on gender and sexuality look like. This normalisation of male affection would also allow for more nuanced definitions and alternative readings of Afghan masculinity in the diaspora. For now, these thoughts remain hypothetical since Afghan dance takes place in almost exclusively Afghan spheres (aside from when embedded in pedagogical or social work settings).

## Concluding remarks

This article links theoretical perspectives on the intersectionality of performing bodies with meanings associated with dance in the Afghan refugee experience. Theory here should not only serve as mere academic framework for interpreting empirical data. Rather, it aims to reveal unspoken implications of musical performance, in terms of gender, sexuality, racialisation, and ethnicization. Performing bodies bear political meaning as they performatively create positionalities. Musical performance relies on cultural encoding and culture-specific knowledge; likewise, performing bodies are not universally intelligible. Gender and sexuality, race, and ethnicity gain significance in music and dance practices as performing bodies signify their intersecting positionalities.

The various phases of Afghan migration to different places at different times show varied adaptions and new features related to time, destination, and causes of migration. This text adds a dance-focused perspective on the Afghan community in Austria and thereby musical performances of the Afghan diaspora in Europe after the long summer of migration 2015. Within a social climate characterised by anti-Muslim racism and in particular an anti-migrant rhetoric and a demonisation of Afghans, music and dance seem to be of particular relevance to the community but of no interest to the general public debate on Afghan Otherness.

In the precarious situations of Afghan refugees in Austria, the act of dancing serves as a collective corporeal negotiation of belonging. Moving one's body to sounds that are distinctively marked as Afghan connects to narratives of both origin and diasporic identity. It enables a corporeally enacted positive connection to Afghan-ness, an identity which outside the dance venue is represented exclusively negatively. Accordingly, during fieldwork interviews, notions of "being proud" and of "feeling joy" prevail in characterisations of dancing. The bodily joy felt while moving to beloved and danceable music is crucial in this respect. The relevance of dance becomes even more evident when we remember the precarious living conditions of most Afghan refugees in Europe: perilous financial conditions, uncertain asylum status with the imminent danger of negative asylum decisions, not being allowed to work, and often being separated from family members. Dancing to music in this respect also becomes an act of self-care and survival.

It is hard to predict how the new Afghan community in Austria will shape up, how the political climate will develop, and what opportunities Afghans will be able to grasp considering the severe structural and interpersonal racism with which they are surrounded. The uncertain future of Afghanistan adds to Austrian Afghans experiencing only elusive opportunities to take

root and establish a safe living environment. It is certain, however, that the possibility for freedom of cultural expression constitutes a major factor shaping one's life with respect to forced migration. The Afghan community is heterogeneous, Afghans may prefer a variety of musical expressions including non-Afghan music, and they themselves define their cultural affiliation and ethnic self-identification. And still, to a lot of Afghan individuals in Europe, music that is identified as Afghan, and the social dancing to this music, seem of particular relevance. Performing bodies – dancing individuals – become sites of collectively navigating relocation and defining diasporic community, sites of gender and sexual agency, and sites of cultural agency within an anti-migration, anti-Muslim, and anti-Afghan environment.

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**Fieldwork**

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