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A woman's body' Navigating notions of
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PRACTITIONER REPORT:

‘Where are you from? A woman’s body’: Navigating notions of belonging through poetry and playwriting with refugees and asylum seekers

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This article reflects on the complicated entanglements of belonging in encounters between asylum seekers or refugees with citizens of a shared country. Using the question ‘where are you from?’ as a key to discussing what is at stake in these meetings, the following takes seriously the idea that we come into being also through the meeting with one another, both as nations and individuals. These encounters operate within a larger production of media and political narratives of hostility, making belonging at the very least politically a contested idea in a refugee’s life. Drawing in the voices and experiences from two separate contexts and fieldworks of writing plays and poetry with groups of refugees and asylum seekers (a women’s group in Glasgow and a group living in a deportation centre near Copenhagen), my practice seeks to demonstrate the capacity of theatre to navigate these complex and entwined perceptions of belonging.

Keywords: practice-as-research, asylum, belonging, refugee, playwriting

where are you from?

here

where are you from?

the sky

where are you from?

the moon

where are you from?

the sun

where are you from?

you, you, you

where are you from?

afghanistan

where are you from?

afghanistan

where are you from?

afghanistan

(Sareh¹, Youth Community Support Agency,
2018).

Introduction

Why should there be a difficulty in asking someone 'where are you from?', and how does this dynamic change when the conversation happens between a citizen of a

country and a refugee whose situation of belonging may be precarious? Can daily interactions such as these make or unmake senses of belonging? And how does poetry and playwriting create a different space around these conversations?

I offer these questions as a preamble to reflect the complications in navigating notions of belonging in the two fieldworks this article centres around: one with the Women's Group from the Youth Support Community Agency (YCSA) in Glasgow, a multicultural group of women from refugee, asylum seeker and migrant backgrounds; the other with a group of rejected asylum seekers living in Deportation Centre Sjølsmark northwest of Copenhagen who were all users of Trampoline House². Although radically different contexts, the question of 'where are you from?' was a recurring and central component reflecting the complicated and refracted notions of belonging.

It is crucial to note the difference in the fieldworks from the outset. The YCSA group live in accommodation in and around Glasgow, go to college to learn English and are in various stages of the asylum process. The group in Sjølsmark are all rejected asylum seekers waiting to be sent back to their home-country, or the country they were fingerprinted in under the EU's 'Dublin Regulation'. However, it is impossible for many of them either to stay or to leave: because their home countries will not collaborate with the Danish government; because it would be too dangerous for them to return; or because the conditions for asylum seekers in the countries they have fingerprinted in are worse than Denmark.

Both fieldworks were centered around the process of creating a play about how the question of home and belonging arose and manifested in their lives: with the YCSA the play became *This Is Amelia / We Are All Amelias*, a heartfelt reimagining of the story of Amelia

Earhart set against the realities of living with and fleeing from conflict. The group in Sjølsmark wrote the play *This Is Us*, a story of two politicians in an ideological battle over asylum laws, interspersed with scenes and monologues reflecting the daily realities of living in a deportation centre and the struggles of being seen first and foremost as a refugee. In both of the creative processes the groups spent time on dramaturgy and unpicking the workings of plot and stories, as a way to hand over the writing process to them, and to understand the stories constructed around their identities and legal situations of being refugees and asylum seekers by media and political rhetorics.

Taking the *difficulty* of asking ‘where are you from?’ as a key to discussing the responsibilities of belonging in everyday encounters and conversations came from poems written by the women from YCSA; four of which open each section of this article, and one of which I take my title from (see Asma’s poem). The YCSA facilitated several creative workshops with the group. As part of a sharing of these outcomes, they took part in a poetry workshop and evening sharing at The Scottish Poetry Library in March 2018. The workshop was facilitated by poet Hannah Lavery. In the session, Hannah asked them to name the questions they found it annoying to be asked. These were: ‘where are you from?’, ‘how did you arrive?’ and ‘why are you here?’ Based on this the group wrote poems responding in the ways they wished they could in the everyday conversations and encounters where such questions arose. At the 2018 UNESCO Spring School in Glasgow I presented a paper on the poems exploring whether, in encounters between citizens and asylum seekers or refugees, the questions in the women’s poems could be considered uprooting and destabilising to senses of belonging. In the Q&A session following the paper the audience expressed conflicting opinions on the issue: some felt that ‘where are you from?’ should not be discarded as a harmless conversation starter coming from compassionate desire to know a person more deeply; others reported questioning their belonging to current

contexts when asked; some expressed the inability to account fully for a life lived with complicated geographical origins or precarious belongings in such conversations.

This is not to discard the question ‘where are you from?’ as a harmless conversation starter or to assume the fragility of the person being asked. Rather, I wish to suggest that there might be more at stake in these conversation starters than first imagined. Instead of presenting a case for the question being either fully harmful or fully harmless, it is perhaps more productive to use it as a backdrop for discussing the difficulty of belonging and the ethical responsibilities and challenges surrounding how we interact with each other when we are in different situations of belonging. The women’s poetry and three scenes from the two plays written with the groups will form the basis of this article’s exploration of how poetry and playwriting opens up the conversation in a different way.

There are several unsettlingings at play in this. Creating work (both research or creative) that seeks to be decolonising, done, in my case, from the scholarly and artistic perspective of a white female who benefits from citizenship of one European country and residency in another is, and should be, uncomfortable. This does not mean that the work should not be attempted regardless, but it does, perhaps, mean letting the voices of lived experience take precedence over more theoretical ones. Secondly, problematising everyday conversations where questions like ‘where are you from?’ demands unsettling: the unsettling that the ways we speak and meet each other is part of a larger social and political framework, and the unsettling that we can misunderstand each other regardless of intentions. I would therefore like to take seriously the Danish philosopher and theologian K.E. Løgstrup’s idea that: ‘Den enkelte har aldrig med et andet menneske at gøre uden at han holder noget af dets liv i sin hånd—*one never has anything to do with another*

person without holding a part of their life in one's hand'
(My translation, Løgstrup, 2012, p.25) as a framework to
speak about how we come into existence in the meeting
of the other, and how these encounters carry the
potential for making or unmaking senses of belonging.

Person = Country

why are you here?

to explore

why are you here?

to show the world what i have

why are you here?

it is a right to be here

why are you here?

relax

why are you here?

am i not allowed here?

why are you here?

fly

why are you here?

high

(Fatma M, YCSA, 2018).

In a sense, the tone is already structured around encounters where belonging is at stake. The idea of belonging itself is bound up in social structures of opportunity, privilege and nationality: belonging is even formulated around us by a larger production of media and political narratives formulating who belongs and who does not. In the wake of the so-called refugee crisis, recent years have seen an increasing 'narrative of crisis' (Ahmed, 2004, p.132). The overarching story about asylum seekers is 'a single, virtually uninterrupted message of hostility and rejection' (Cohen cited in Jeffers, 2012, p.25) constructing 'those who are "without home" as the "source of our [the receiving countries and their populations'] fear"' (Ahmed, 2004, p.136). Added to this are the images portraying bombed cities and precarious journeys across land and seas by those seeking safety from conflicts in their home countries. All of these narratives and framings, combined with the loss of home countries, means that belonging is, at the very least politically (and I would suggest also existentially) a contested idea in a refugee and asylum seeker's life.

Asylum seekers are also asked to account for their 'from' in many ways outside everyday conversations. When seeking asylum, they must:

convince the authorities that they have a clear and credible story which demonstrates the individual past persecution in their own country [...] This must be couched in the terminology of international law so that it is recognised as operating within the boundaries of the 1951 UN Convention [...] But the story alone is not enough and it must be rehearsed to create a credible *performance*, convincing in the telling as well as the construction (Jeffers, 2012, p.30).

Seen in this light, 'where are you from?' is part of a system of nationalistic and formalistic belonging that asylum seekers have to operate within. The story told to authorities has to be not only credible, but also *performed* with credibility before the project of belonging to a new country and context can even begin. All of these factors 'makes that figure [the asylum seeker] do more work' (Ahmed, 2004, p.122). Indeed, the work of integration, of belonging and of convincing authorities that, according to conventions and in line with bureaucratic languages, they have the *right* to belong. However, between the way a country, an asylum system and the media treat them this process can be extremely complicated as '[v]ery few people have the strength to conserve their own integrity if their social, political and legal status is completely confused' (Arendt, 1996, p.116). Indeed, 'we lose confidence in ourselves if society does not approve of us' (p.119).

In terms of these factors having an effect on everyday conversations of belonging, Daniel, a refugee from Iran and a user of Trampoline House, said: 'whenever I open the TV or newspapers, all of the media here [referring to Denmark], most of them are against refugees' (Daniel, interview with the author, 14th December 2018). When I asked him how he felt when people in Denmark asked him where he is from, he answered: 'it's one of the most difficult questions for me to answer. I'm thinking maybe they asked this question because they feel I don't belong to their country and I should go back'.

In the first workshop with the group in Sjølsmark, I asked them to write or draw all the things that made them feel like they do not belong. One of them wrote 'person = country'. He told me that whenever he was defined by or equated with his country, or categorised as being an asylum seeker before being seen a person, he felt like he did not belong. When the question arose again people in the group expressed the same frustration of being categorised as a refugee and being defined only in

terms of nationality by the media and the Danish people they met in their daily lives. They made clear that their nationalities and the way they had journeyed to Denmark (perhaps having been fingerprinted in another country) formed the basis of why they had been rejected as asylum seekers, and thus why they were not allowed to belong.

Sjælsmark is an old army barrack located behind a fence and approved as a deportation centre by political majority in 2015. It is considered a last stop in Denmark and the conditions in the centre are designed to signify to the residents that they are no longer welcome and should return to their countries. It is difficult to get to and from the camp via public transport and only very few of the residents get subsidies from the government; they are not allowed to cook their own food but have to eat in the cafeteria at three set times a day. If they want to stay with friends and family, they must apply for this weeks in advance. Their keys log when they exit and enter, and there is close to no privacy. Larger families share a very small flat while single people share bunk bed rooms with other residents (Hergel, 2017). In public debates, Sjælsmark has often been compared to a prison and the daily running of the centre is carried out by Kriminalforsorgen (the segment of the Danish social system that also operate Danish prisons). Life in the camp sends the clear message that the asylum seekers are not welcome in Denmark and that they are seen as criminals, disregarding the fact they have committed no crime, unless fleeing unsafe situations in their home countries could be considered one.

The group's daily lives were dominated by this lack of liberties, agencies and repeated contact with systems that denote they do not belong in Denmark. They told me that because of these experiences, when someone asked them where they were from, they often answered with 'good European countries' (France, Italy or Spain), rather than their actual nationalities (Syria, Lebanon, Iran) simply to avoid being categorised or seen in a certain way, or

because they had experienced that people made excuses to leave the conversation if they answered with their actual nationalities. The fact that people were often prejudiced against them because of their nationality meant they had learned to lie in order to avoid what seemed like the inevitable conclusion of such encounters.

When interviewing the women from YCSA I asked Asma what made her feel not-at-home:

Asma: Sometimes you get people just out of nowhere asking you weird questions. That makes me a little bit feel out of place. Like those questions that we answered at the poetry [referring to Hannah Lavery's workshop]. That kind of makes you feel like this is not your place.

Helene: Because of the people who ask or because of the questions?

Asma: The questions. That kind of shakes my comfortability of being here.

(Asma, YCSA, Interview on 28th May 2018).

As Asma expressed, it was not necessarily that the people who asked her did not mean well, it was the questions themselves that shook her comfort and belief in not only belonging, but being in Glasgow. Thereby showing that regardless of intentions, the questions themselves had an impact on the way she understood herself as part of the country she inhabits, perhaps and most likely because of her experiences with a society predominantly not approving of asylum seekers and refugees. Thus showing that the space around the questions is already one that carries the remnants or echoes of the larger media and political production of hostile narratives.

Doing the work of belonging together

how did you arrive?

ocean

how did you arrive?

water

how did you arrive?

air

how did you arrive?

fly

how did you arrive?

how?

how did you arrive?

here?

how did you arrive?

any problem?

how did you arrive?

don't worry

how did you arrive?

nae bother.

(Fatma A, YCSA, 2018).

Central to the question of belonging is that of hospitality and of being politically and ethically implicated, both as nations and individuals, in our encounters with each other. There is significant scholarship on hospitality (Still and Derrida, 2013; Levinas, 2013; Irigaray, 2008; Cixous, 2014), and while a deeper exploration of the notions and complications (including the power relations of who gives and who receives, who is constructed as the host and who is constructed as the guest or the stranger) goes beyond the framework of this article, there are relevant points to be made by using the term.

First, the notion of hospitality offers a framework for taking into account the increasing amount of thought being given to the fact that the so-called refugee crisis is more about European countries' national identity and struggle to adhere to conventions than it is about the refugees themselves (Weiwei, 2018; Jeffers, 2012; Arendt, 1973). Indeed, 'the treatment of refugees can be taken as a kind of ethical measure with which to assess the degree of hospitality or largesse shown by a nation towards the stranger' (Jeffers, 2012, p.6). While there is, evidently, a difference between relating on individual levels versus national ones, the building-blocks of ethics in the realm of hospitality become apparent in exactly this relationship—as Derrida has said, '*ethics is hospitality*; ethics is so thoroughly co-extensive with the experience of hospitality' (cited in Still, 2013, p.7). Living with and among people who come from the countries affected by war and conflicts makes it increasingly urgent to consider the meeting of the other as 'the venue for [...] ethical responsibility' (Butler, 2005, p.22) and what we are called to do with this responsibility. One suggestion could be to purposefully address the structural imbalances, as Simone Weil suggests: '[i]f we know in what way society is unbalanced, we must do what we can to add weight to the light scale' (Weil, 2008, p.171). However, by extension it could also be necessary to contemplate whether it is about more than hospitality or hostility, about more than citizens or countries opening or closing their doors to those arriving. For example, if '[t]he

presence of migrant, forced or otherwise, offers an opportunity to re-define *all* identities as ethically produced' (Jeffers, 2012, p.10), then the redefinition of this would involve a closer look not only at the political and national structures of belonging, but also at those who are in the position of offering this hospitality and welcome.

Secondly, hospitality is above all 'an everyday experience' (Still, 2013, p.1). Therefore, to bring this into a more concrete realm, refugee minister Niels Nymann Eriksen turns around Løgstrup's thought of holding a part of the another's life in our hand (2012, p.25). In his work in the multicultural area of Vesterbro in Copenhagen, Eriksen has encountered the opposite idea; namely, that in meeting the other (in this case, specifically asylum seekers and refugees), they are the ones holding something of *his* life in their hands (Eriksen, 2018). Turning this around shows that however unsettling, however complicated, there is a radical need to allow not only being held but also changed by another, both as nations and as individuals. Indeed, as Luce Irigaray notes, it is exactly in opening up from within that the challenge of hospitality lies: '[t]o open a place for the other, for a world different from ours, from inside of our own tradition, is the first and most difficult multicultural gesture' (2008, p.133). Hospitality (and by extension belonging) in this sense shifts from being something citizens of a country may choose to do or not to do to the people arriving from other places into something that could be a mutual project. In that case it becomes not about welcoming other people into a culture that already exists, but rather exploring the possibility of how we can create new and shared cultures of belonging together.

A Woman's Body

where are you from?

home

where are you from?

because I'm black?

where are you from?

relax

where are you from?

a woman's body

(Asma, YCSA, 2018).

Neither theatrical nor poetic space are uncomplicated; both are implicated in structures and histories of power that have prioritised certain positions and stories over others. It is necessary to remain critical, as James Thompson is, of the idea that a theatrical project dealing with politics through subject matter or people involved, is 'by some default process [...] one that can claim an automatic contribution to social change' (2009, p.5). Indeed, centering theatrical performances around people's life experiences can lead, in Clare Bishop's words, to people merely reinforcing and performing 'their own socio-economic category' (as cited in Mumford and Garde, 2015, p.9) without subjecting it to critique and examination. This line of questioning is essential to theatrical and poetic space involving both subject matter and subject positions around refugeedom. However, there is also the notion of artistic space and practice having the ability to present counter-narratives set against a socio-political framework of hostility. For example, Mieke Bal's concept of 'migratory aesthetics' offers an 'ethical imperative to provide a congenial, friendly soundscape in which mobility—the migratory—is not the despised exception but the valued norm' (2007, p.33). And Derrida offers that: '[a]n act of hospitality can only be poetic' (2000, p.2). In this view arts practice can open up 'a counter-reality [...] which may be only imagined, but

which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual' (Heaney, 1996, p.18). Exactly because of its relation to the actual, poetry in this context can extend the notion of belonging beyond being categorised as a refugee; it can use the experiences of conflicts of belonging and accounting for a 'from' for something other than 'bureaucratic performances' (Jeffers, 2012, p.16). Furthermore, both poetry and playwriting work with the creation of images through and, indeed, beyond words. Poetic and theatrical images can 'express without formulating' (Walter Benjamin cited in Stevenson, 2014, p.15) and they 'are useful precisely because they can capture uncertainty and contradiction without having to resolve it' (p.13).

The women's poems (see the cited poems by Sareh, Fatma and Asma) make clear to the reader the conversational realities they have been exposed to when having to account for their 'from', and make them think of alternative ways of answering and of belonging. The poetic space that these answers occupy is different and perhaps richer than geographical location as it can speak to a space of shared experience. For example, answering 'where are you from?' with 'home' or 'a woman's body' speaks to a universality, to a place beyond location where we are all alike, as we are all from 'home', all from 'a woman's body'. Notably, the majority of the women in the group are from countries and situations that are hostile to women, where it is hard to be a woman, to have a woman's body. Asma's poem uses this as a point of defiance and of unity; being from and of a woman's body is what allows everyone to be in the world, the human experience of 'from' without which nobody would exist. 'Where are you from? / you' speaks to the ways we belong to each other, and, 'the sun', 'the moon' states how we belong on earth as human beings, being grounded by the cosmic and relational realities of our lives on earth: night, day, heat, cold, relationships, community.

Theatre adds a spatial component and perhaps a more immediate relation to the world if we think of performance also as 'vulnerable and open to dialogue with the world' (Conquergood, 1985, p.2). It can, in Avtar Brah's words, hold the potential for 'diaspora space [where] multiple and subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed' in a space that 'is small enough to examine moments of encounter; the space between two individuals on stage' (cited in Jeffers, 2012, pp.10-11).

As mentioned above, in writing their play, the YCSA women's group chose to work re-work the story of Amelia Earhart into their play. In their story, Amelia is from a world where she does not belong; she wants to be a pilot, but women are (among other things) not allowed to fly in her country. She goes to explore three different countries to find a place where she can be her true self, as a woman, as a pilot, as a person in the world. After leaving the first country, Lemon Island, a place where she must be under male supervision at all times, she ends up in a bus going to Nowhere. In this scene the women used some of their lines of poetry to show Amelia as a displaced stranger arousing the curiosity of her fellow passengers who want to know her geographical origin:

Passenger: Where are you from?

Amelia: A place that buried my hopes and dreams.

[...]

Passenger: Where are you from?

Amelia: Oh for goodness sake.

Passenger: But where are you from?

Amelia: Here.

Passenger: But where are you really from?

Amelia: A woman's body.

Passenger: Why are you here?

Amelia: To see the unseen and share the stories.

Passenger: Where are you going?

Amelia: On a journey that's worthy.

On and on she goes, answering questions nobody should be asked, reminding her only that she's not home anymore and she doesn't yet belong where she's going.

[...]

Amelia. Please, just nobody ask me anything anymore. I'm nobody from nowhere, okay.

(Youth Support Community Agency, 2018, excerpt from Scene 3).

Transforming the poems into lines for a play restructures the situation. It takes it out from the imagistic realm of poetry and makes clear the situation and the frustration of meeting such questions when one is on a journey of belonging. Amelia's exasperation shows in the last line ('nobody from nowhere'), giving up on being known and satisfying the too curious passengers who are not content with being answered in poetry.

Later Amelia makes a narrow escape from Nowhere, a country where a war is raging yet nobody can remember exactly why the war started or what they are fighting for.

She is caught by the authorities, identified as a foreigner and sent to a detention centre. In the car with other refugees, she addresses the question of belonging:

Amelia looks at everyone who's travelling with her.

She wonders about their faces and their lives.

Amelia: Where are we going?

Person: We're being sent to Detention.

Amelia: Why?

Person: Don't know. I guess nobody wants to deal with us. Why are you here?

Amelia: I'm trying to find a country I can belong to.

People: Aren't we all?

Amelia: Where do you belong?

People: We don't belong anywhere.

Amelia: That's not true.

People: Yes it is.

Amelia: No, we belong to every drop of joy, we belong to Hope, we belong to Love.

Person: Life isn't like that.

(Youth Support Community Agency, 2018, excerpt from Scene 5).

The situation in the car draws on the realities and risks that asylum seekers face of being sent to detention. The scene tackles both the reality of the situation ('I guess nobody wants to deal with us') and the poetic potential of belonging to other things than nations and geographical locations ('We belong to every drop of joy, we belong to Hope, we belong to Love'). The writing thereby works on two levels; both speaking a poetic and alternative conversation into hostile places of non-belonging as well as unlocking the creative possibilities of allowing something different to emerge from those experiences.

Choosing Amelia Earhart's story as a backdrop and collectively writing from the existing poetry and the group's individual stories provided the opportunity to draw from a rich patchwork of fiction, biography and creative approaches to belonging through storytelling and poetry. The obstacles Amelia encounters were ones some of the women encountered in their lives. The hostile places Amelia is in: the car with refugees, detention centres, places where it is hard to be a woman—all drew on experiences of the group.

Much like the real Amelia Earhart's life, the story ends unresolved. After gaining access to her own aeroplane, Amelia in the women's story flies over the Atlantic. Her quest has not been achieved and so she journeys on, yet to find a place that feels like home. Leaving Amelia in this in-between stage where she might (as the real Amelia did) disappear never to be found again or might yet find her home, shows the complications of belonging in the refugee situation: the ongoing story, the continuing journey of exploring the spaces—poetic or real—to belong.

One of the scenes punctuating the main story of the two politicians in *This Is Us* by the group at Deportation Centre Sjølsmark drew directly on the

experience mentioned above of answering different 'good European countries' when people asked them where they were from:

A refugee, a mormon and a politician walk into a bar.

Just joking.

No seriously, so one day I walked past a bar, out in front smoking was this beautiful girl, and I wanted to talk to her.

Now I have a survival tactic for situations like these. In my pocket at all times, I have this paper. It's a plan, it is very important to me, what it is, a paper of Denmark cities in one column, and on the other column, it is matched with european and good countries to tell girls that I'm from so they don't freak out. Imagine—'hey, where are you from?' 'Syria'—She'd be out of there. So I checked what city I'm in, and what's the matched country on the other side. So for example: Allerød = Italy. And it works every time, except for this one time.

He goes and ask someone from the audience that they agreed before.

Nicholas. Hi

Girl. Hey

Nicholas. My name Nicolas

Girl. Hi Nicolas, my name is Anne. Where are you from?

Nicholas. (He checks the paper). I'm from France, and you?

Anne. I'm Danish, born and raised.

Nicolas. I saw you from away, and you got my attention. Can we get to know each other?

Anne. Sure. I saw you too.

Nicolas. Cool! can I have your phone number?

Anne. Yes absolutely. Can I have your phone to put the number in?

Nicolas. (To the audience) See?

Nicolas hands her the phone, and then his friend comes to him and speaks in Arabic.

Friend (in Arabic). Hey you, will you introduce me?

Nicolas get nervous and tries to push him away and speaks in french.

Nicolas. Degage! Go away! pas maintenant.

Anne. Who's that? what did he say?

Nicolas. (in english to Anne). No idea, clearly he's crazy. (In French to his friend) Go away.

Friend. (In Arabic) What are you doing?

Anne. Seems like he knows you. (To the friend) Do you know him?

Friend. I'm his friend, we know each back in Syria.

Nicholas. (In Arabic) Please stop.

Friend. We were just speaking Arabic.

Anne. Arabic? From Syria?

Nicolas tries to stop him from speaking, arguing and pushing his friend in Arabic. Then

Anne hands him his phone back, without giving the number.

Anne. Hey sorry, my mom called me an hour ago, I have to see my friends back home. Pleasure meeting you.

So I walk on. And 20 minutes later Anne is sitting with an Italian guy, and not like an 'Allerød = Italy guy'³, a real wine, spaghetti, pizza Italian one.

(Trampoline House, 2018, excerpt from Scene 7).

This scene thinks humour into a situation the group had identified as times where they questioned their senses of belonging. However, the scene does not seek to resolve the situation. Neither Nicholas's nor Anne's positions change, speaking to the structural challenges they both operate within; he, as a refugee, she as a 'Danish, born and raised' citizen who, for unspecified reasons, chooses to leave once she learns Nicholas is from Syria. In this situation, much like in the group's own lives, being part of the story does not change anything; rather it shows the conflicts of the encounter. Anne is unable to make him welcome, or to sustain her interest in him once she learns where he is really from; he is, ultimately, unable to hide it even if he plays the role of a person who is accepted in the situation they share. These two positions exist alongside each other even if there is not an easy or immediate solution to the problems of belonging between them.

Although neither *Amazing Amelia / We Are All Amelias*, *This Is Us*, or the YCSA women's poems solve the problems of belonging faced in refugee situations or encounters that carry the question of 'where are you

from?’), they do offer a space of holding contradictions together—showing the stakes and precarities with which belonging is made and unmade. It is perhaps exactly in this resistance to an immediate or easy solution that the positions become clear and the space of poetry and theatre enter as a possible way of unfolding the question of belonging outside and beyond the narratives produced by socio-political and nationalistic systems of belonging.

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Notes

1. Some of the participants in this research have chosen to use pseudonyms while others preferred their given first names. These are not distinguished in the body of the article. [↗](#)
2. Trampoline House is a community house for refugees and asylum seekers in Copenhagen. [↗](#)
3. Allerød is a town located very close to Sjælsmark. [↗](#)

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About the author

Helene Grøn, AHRC funded PhD candidate in Theatre Studies at the University of Glasgow and Glasgow Refugee, Asylum and Migration Network (GRAMNet).

Helene is a Danish playwright, librettist, facilitator and researcher, currently residing in Glasgow. Helene co-founded the theatre company Leylines, bringing to the stage stories of home, homelessness and being caught between languages and cultures and has written librettos and operas for Scottish Opera, The Night With... and Cottiers' Chamber Project; her plays have had readings

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