Spectacular Bodies, Unsettling Objects: Material Performance as Intervention in Stereotypes of Refugees

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Husam Abed is a Palestinian refugee puppetry artist who runs Dafa Puppet Theatre, based in Prague, with his Hungarian partner, Réka Deák. The company performs and facilitates workshops in refugee camps and theatre festivals across the Middle East and Europe, often focusing on the animation of found objects within camps. They prioritize simplicity and metaphor in their work, a core rationale for their use of puppetry and object theatre within performances that often incorporate the human body. For Dafa, puppetry and object theatre allow for a distancing from literal interpretation in performance, which can reinforce stereotypes by merely replicating surface codes of meaning. Instead, Dafa looks to puppetry and object theatre as modes of displacing and thereby transforming these codes, by transferring meaning from the human body into puppets, and from objects' functional use into symbolic associations. They are interested in the ways in which puppetry and object theatre can "transform the space" by turning a dining table, for example, into a representation of the earth. Their focus on using found objects allows them to bring traces of associations and use, objects' genealogies, into the performance space to layer the objects with additional meaning (Abed and Deák 2017). *The Smooth Life* is Abed's 2015 solo show, directed by Deák, exploring his family's history migrating between refugee camps, with a focus on Abed's experiences growing up and his complex relationship with his father. The piece is performed to small audiences in intimate settings such as apartment kitchens. Abed uses objects including grains of rice, photographs, a map, a frame drum, and puppets made from cardboard, wood, and family photographs as he leads the audience through his story. In this analysis, I focus on three types of

materials that Abed and Deák utilize in the piece: grains of rice, a map of the Middle East, and photographs.

When I interviewed Abed and Deák in 2017, they spoke of their shared desire to tell Abed's personal story in a simple way, a task made difficult by the platform of history on which his story and that of his family has taken place. Deák described Abed's initial work on the show as being too overtly political, which prevented him from exploring his story beyond existing and well-rehearsed political and historical narratives—narratives that courted stereotype. As they developed the piece together, they focused on returning to the theme of simplicity, using puppetry and object manipulation to delve into the layers of the story without becoming fixed within flattened and foreclosed interpretations of events. This focus on simplicity led them to choose simple materials such as rice and wood, as well as "concrete" materials coded with political and social meanings such as a map and photographs, to trace Abed's story, and that of his family, with and alongside Abed's physical presence in the performance.

The Smooth Life therefore deploys both puppetry and object theatre at the centre of its storytelling. The term object theatre derives from *théâtre d'objects* in Europe that emerged during the 1980s and involved the theatrical animation of everyday objects (Margolies 2013). Object theatre overlaps with a genre coined by Frank Proschan in 1983 of "performing objects…material images of humans, animals, or spirits that are created, displayed, or manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance" (4). Proschan's definition links the animation of objects to puppetry—for example, when a match or a ball takes on the characteristic of a human subject. Today, *théâtre d'objets*, performing objects, and puppetry are often approached by scholars and practitioners as forms of "material performance," which draw on new materialisms including object-oriented ontologies to foreground the agency of inanimate objects. In puppetry scholar Dassia Posner's

(2015, 5) words, material performance is "performance that assumes that inanimate matter contains agency not simply to mimic or mirror, but also to shape and create."

In my examination of object theatre, I draw on Bill's Brown's (2001) concept of thing theory, an area within new materialisms that focuses on the meanings given to objects by human subjects and the concurrent ways in which things mediate and partially constitute social relations and the human subject. Brown draws on Heidegger's differentiation between "things" (that which exists in the world prior to human interpretation) and "objects"(that which is used or worked with) —to distinguish the ontic "thing" (that which can exist without subjects) from the ontological "object" (a specific creation of subjects). I draw on Brown's emphasis on the ways in which ontological objects mediate and constitute social relations and the human subject in my examination of puppetry and object theatre in *The Smooth Life,* and the ways in which such human/object interactions can intervene in and disrupt the stereotyping of representations of refugees in which images are fixed and depth of meaning is collapsed into foreclosed interpretation. I also turn my focus to the ontic thing in order to consider the ways in which material attributes and processes, such as decay, figure into the performance alongside the object's mediation and constitution of social relations.

I focus in particular on the notion of detritus, or that which is discarded and excluded from use-value, linking the detritus of decaying objects to the process of human abjection within the stereotype. I draw here on Imogen Tyler's (2013) analysis of social abjection of asylum seekers in *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, in which she examines the ways in which media, political, and social discourses around asylum seekers in the twenty-first century UK have contributed to an "asylum invasion complex" marked by a "deliberate conflation of migrants into a singular national abject—the bogus asylum seeker" that limits any

transformative potential of the recognition of suffering and injustice. Arguing that this relentless dehumanization is a necessary component to the maintenance of the neoliberal state, Tyler advocates a critical counter-mapping grounded in affect—or melancholic states—as a necessary response:

> The recognition of suffering and injustice has limited transformatory political potential in a context where the deliberate conflation of migrants into a singular national abject—the bogus asylum seeker—has overwhelmed public culture. Nevertheless, the *melancholic states* that critical processes of counter-mapping make visible are important critical responses to the ontological obliteration of personhood that is central to Britain's neoliberal immigration industry. This mapping can produce alternative ways of looking, however partial, depressed, reactive and liminal the ensuing knowledge might be. (76)

One form of such counter-mapping, I suggest, is a theatrical remapping of material detritus from an abjection model—the exclusion of detritus as part of subject formation and accepted social relations—to a model in which detritus forms a central component of subject formation and social relations through its foregrounding as site of meaning and affect. To return to Brown's (2001) formulation of the ontological object, I suggest that in theatrical contexts that invite spectators to participate in the affect produced by objects typically dismissed as "mere things"—what Brown describes as "beneath objecthood"—the processes of abjection that underpin stereotyped representations of refugee bodies can be reconfigured from an inclusion/exclusion model to a space to *linger* with these excluded objects, bodies, and feelings. This process is layered and deepened by paying attention to what is happening with materiality in the space. In *The Smooth Life,* this attention reveals materials insisting on humanity (rice) and materials (maps and photographs) whose decay matters.

Rice and abjection

In a 2016 video of the show performed in a Swedish apartment kitchen, Abed introduces himself to the audience, then leaves his assistant to show a PowerPoint presentation that contextualizes his

family's history while he begins cooking dinner for the audience in the background. Abed and Deák discussed with me their interest in sharing food with the people with whom they come into contact through their work. For them, making and eating meals together is a core component of community building, and one that they always incorporate into their puppetry work whether facilitating workshops or performing shows. Often this communal meal takes place following the theatrical event; in *The Smooth Life* it is embedded into the show itself.

In the piece, Abed makes multiple uses of grains of rice. He cites two sources for this choice: a saying from his grandfather that Palestinians are spread all over the world in diaspora like grains of rice that have been thrown, and a workshop he took with Simon Rann of the Philippe Genty Company in which they worked with multiple materials including rice (2017). This workshop planted in Abed's imagination the idea of using rice in a theatre piece, which became the impetus for the decision while making *The Smooth Life*. For Abed and Deák, using rice on the map allowed them to play with a fluctuating metaphor anchored by a solid object. The map in this context represents solidity both literally and figuratively, as it refers to a concrete reality even though, as discussed above, they strategically depicte this concrete reality as fluctuating and contested. Abed emphasizes that using rice as a metaphor made it easier to talk about Palestine without becoming too literal. Addressing the material properties of rice and its potential for theatrical use, Deák describes rice as "so fragile, so small, so tiny, you can cook it, eat it." Abed identifies an additional layer of meaning: "If you put all these grains of rice together in [a] big sack, it has its weight, it's effective." For Abed and Deák, rice therefore serves as a potent metaphor for diaspora in exile, in which people who might feel weak separately are able to bring their abilities together in a collective. The use of rice also allows Abed and Deák to play with scale, as the human body is depicted from the small-scale grain of rice through the slightly larger-scale

puppets and finally the life-size body of Abed. As each of these scales are performed on the map, they are simultaneously rendered larger-than-life in contrast to the map dimensions, providing spectators with multiple layers of perception of the scale of the human body on the stage of human-created border demarcations.

Rice makes its first appearance behind the audience as Abed boils water and begins cooking a chicken and rice casserole. As the audience watches the PowerPoint presentation, the sounds of dry rice being poured into a pot are audible in the background. When the PowerPoint presentation ends and Abed returns to the table, he introduces the audience to members of his family, represented by individual grains of rice which he carefully picks up on his finger, kisses, then lays on the map covering the table (Figure 2.2). As Abed describes his family's movement between camps, he carefully shifts the grains of rice along the surface of the map. Members of the audience peer closely at these individual rice grains, which have been given an affective resonance of loved individuals by Abed's gentle and personal interactions.

Abed traces his father's journey from Karama Refugee Camp to Baqa'a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Jordan in 1968, where Abed is born and the family begins to grow. The individual grains of rice are replaced with a mound of rice poured over the site on the map, leaving a small mountain of grains. "But it didn't happen like this," Abed states, repeating a trope within the piece that questions its own narration. "But the story—my story—didn't start here," a repeated line as he begins telling the story, questions the origins of a personal story that is connected both biologically to ancestors and additionally to multiple intertwined historical narratives. When Abed forms the rice into a mound on the map and says "But it didn't happen like this," he is referring to the previous moments in which he performed, in a gentle and humorous way, family members leaving camps by carefully placing them in different places on the map with a kiss, implying that

their movements were as gentle as his physical handling of them. In fact, these moments referenced the forced Palestinian migrations of 1948, so it "didn't happen like this."

"But it didn't happen like this" marks a shift in tone for the piece from gentle and humorous to tense. Abed pushes the mound of rice to the Palestinian portion of the map. He stares at it for a moment, then smashes it with his fist, scattering grains of rice across the map. When the grains of rice cease to be singular individuals given emotional resonance through Abed's intimate interactions with them, and instead are simply poured into a mound, a doubling of perception occurs that is central to puppetry and object theatre. The grains of rice continue to represent individual humans on a larger scale, and simultaneously conjure imagery of maggots, uncomfortably resonating with discourses of filth and contagion—"swarms," "scum," "sewage"—central to Tyler's (2013) analysis of the asylum invasion complex. Abed's smashing of the pile with his fist therefore resonates not only as representation of historical violence, but in the moment of performance the audience is invited to have a visceral response of horror (these are loved individuals) and disgust (associated with maggots).[1]

Abed continues his piece with a focus now on more conventional puppets, small wooden carved figures with Abed's family photographs for faces, though he continually returns to the animation of rice grains. Rice performances shift between people in the narrative, to food that Abed and his siblings crave, to musical instruments as it is poured into the frame drum, to water pouring over Abed, leaving rice grains stuck to his head (Figure 2.3). Abed describes these moments as drawn from a childhood ritual, when his grandmother would wash him in a circular

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[1]**Notes**

In my 2017 interview with Abed and Deák, I described my interpretation of this moment and asked whether the "maggot" reference had been intentional. Abed confirmed that this reading had not been their intention, but said that their use of materials and objects in the piece was meant to function on multiple metaphoric levels, and therefore he welcomed various interpretations.

bathtub. He wished to reenact this ritual of bathing/purification using rice which carries multiple connotations in the piece: of his family members, and in this moment of seeds and thus the potential of rebirth. The moment both invests the grains of rice with additional layers of meaning, and enmeshes the notion of family with that of potential and rebirth.

At the end of the piece, Abed brings out his chicken casserole and serves it to the audience. The dish contains cooked rice and is thus imbued with the strands of meaning that have been woven into rice throughout the performance. The act of consuming rice in this moment holds multiple layers of significance. Margolies describes food as acting on and altering the person consuming it: "it is the material most apt to call into question the fixed division between living and lifeless matter" (2015, 330). Bennett (2010) positions food as an actant

> in an agent assemblage that includes among its members my metabolism, cognition, and moral sensibility…Food, as a self-altering, dissipative materiality…enters into what we become. It is one of the many agencies operative in the moods, cognitive dispositions, and moral sensibilities that we bring to bear as we engage the questions of what to eat, how to get it, and when to stop. (51)

In the moment of communal consumption of rice at the end of *The Smooth Life*, these multiple ontologies of food as a material intersect with the multiple strands of significance with which rice has been layered throughout the performance. The moment is potent and has provoked different responses from audience members. Abed and Deák describe a performance of the piece in Jordan in which some audience members reacted negatively to this moment: "You are eating the refugees now!" This was not Dafa's intention; Abed emphasizes that communal eating is associated, amongst other things, with the process of death: "When people die, you celebrate death by life [eating], we are still here, we exist—this is what I want to say" (2017). This moment, for Abed, is about celebrating life, and through the communal meal celebrating the fact that "we still exist, this is our identity, this is who we are." He also associates it with a culture of generosity and of hosting people that he connects to being Palestinian.

The communal meal at the end of *The Smooth Life* enacts these intentions and functions as a locus on which multiple meanings are played out. The audience members' reactions in Jordan point to the symbolism of ingesting the food that has been imbued with additional layers of meaning, though it is not the only possible reaction to this symbolism. One alternate response I would like to consider is that the moment of shared eating enacts abjection in reverse. The object with its array of ontological meanings—including exclusion from human subjectivity—is consumed into the bodies of everyone involved in the theatrical event. Each of these object animations retains the doubling of perception initiated by Abed's opening introductions of and affectionate interactions with his family: the grains of rice are always the loved individuals that Abed gently kissed, even as they shift representations. An affective response towards the grains of rice has been established that resonates throughout their multiple enactments, lending a sense of care and humanity to "mere things." This elevates them to the status of ontological object that retains its human-associated status even when being used as accessory to human narrative and, ultimately, as human food. If the process of abjection is about dehumanization in the service of subject formation in order to construct boundaries around the human, Abed's use of object theatre in his multiple deployments of rice is about insisting on a lingering humanization of that which would normally lie outside those boundaries. This provides a critical counter-mapping, in Tyler's (2013) terms, grounded in affect and opening space to experience differently that which is normally excluded from the human.

Mapping and metaxis

The theme of mapping frames *The Smooth Life*. At the centre of the performance space, around which the audience sits and on which Abed and the puppets/objects perform, is a large circular wooden turntable, covered by a map of the Middle East (Figure 2.4). Dafa Puppet Theatre structure

their work around the ontology of objects, and according to Deák they used the map in the piece because a map has the same type of reality as a photo in that it is a "real object" with use-value. They chose the round table for its associations with the earth on which the map sits, layering the map-object with both its functional and symbolic meanings. Early in the devising process, Abed simply opened the map on the table, emphasizing its functional use. Later, he and Deák decided to fix it to the table "because we felt it had to be fixed" (2017). Abed describes this decision to make the map a permanent part of the table as an intervention in the performance space and connects it to a feature of puppet theatre to "change the space." He and Deák wished to transform the experience of "where are we now" for the spectators by introducing the table first as a dining table, then allowing it to shift meaning through the presence of the map.

As a dramaturgical device, the map allows Abed and Deák to intertwine the multiple stories in the piece which share themes of travelling, immigration, and evacuation. The map's physical presence on the table helps Abed make visible his journey as well as those of his parents and grandparents, including which camps his grandparents entered and left, the journey of Abed's mother returning to Baqa'a camp on an airplane, the family's journey from Damascus to Iran, and Abed's father taking Abed in a car back to Jordan. For Abed and Deák, making these journeys visible was of central importance to the piece, yet they wanted to find a way to avoid being "too concrete, too political" in order to tell a story that could function on a symbolic level and not become too associated with "daily politics" (2017). The map therefore represents concrete reality in symbolic form, and the forms of puppetry and object theatre Abed uses on the map allow for a layering of metaphor and a focus on a personal story that can shift across and between the boundaries of overdetermined historical and political narratives. According to Deák, this was a key strategy, as the difficulties of freeing the story from this narrative overdetermination was not

only on the spectators' side, but on Abed's as well. Specifically, Abed and Deak's aim for the piece was to avoid stereotypes of Palestinian victimization that would foreclose alternate meanings for Abed's story, both in its telling and its reception. Such a foreclosure of meaning, for Abed, would prevent specificity and render invisible moments that punctured this narrative overdetermination.

On a personal scale, this approach allowed Abed to explore the specificity of his own story; on a larger scale it was linked for Abed to his officially unrecognized existence of Palestine, which contests his identity as a Palestinian refugee. Sonja Kuftinec (2009) writes:

> The contested triangle of land between the Jordan River, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Gulf of Aqaba serves not only as a stage *for* conflict, but also spatially stages the vectors *of* that conflict, particularly control over boundaries of land, identity, historical narratives, and acceptable political action. That is, conflict enters not only on the land *per se*, but on who locates and controls territorial boundaries and passage through them, and what (often depersonalized) logic sustains that control. (108)

Abed and Deak's use of a map intentionally sought to intervene in this staging of conflict through mapping Abed's story and his identity on and through a map of Palestine. As they developed the piece, they struggled to find a map that identified "Palestine," until they spotted one by chance at a shop in Prague. This is the map they continue to use in the performance, and the issue of its transformation and decay as an object—at some point it will become so faded and torn that it will be unusable—is of crucial importance due to the difficulty they will find in replacing it.

This object decay and its implications for *The Smooth Life* serve as an experiential metaphor for Abed's continual struggle for validated existence as a Palestinian refugee. His ability to tell his story as he chooses is linked to the material existence and legibility of a rare map that he will struggle to replace. The act of repeatedly telling his story using the map contributes to its decay, putting him in an impossible position: to preserve the map, he cannot tell his story, yet once the map becomes detritus without use-value, his story and identity are rendered invisible. Jane

Bennett (2010) proposes a vital materialism to trouble distinctions between matter and life, drawing on Latour to argue for an agentic materiality—matter as "actant." Eleanor Margolies (2015) draws on this approach in her investigation of puppetry/object performance that uses formless materials such as food, clay, and compost. While Margolies' focus is on formless materials in performance and their potential to tell stories that "extend beyond the human in time and space, working on cosmological, geological, or evolutionary timescales" (332), I wish to consider Abed's map, and its potential to tell stories beyond the apparent narrative and its symbolic role in performance, through the lens of this vital materialistic approach to puppetry and object theatre.

This requires a brief diversion into, and slight repurposing of, Augusto Boal's (1995) concept of metaxis, the "state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image" (43). For Boal, metaxis is derived from Plato's use of the term to denote the middle space between humans and gods which dynamically negotiates the totality of the universe. In Boal's usage it allows for an understanding of the transformative potential of theatre and forms a central analytic for his Theatre of the Oppressed techniques including Forum Theatre, in which the space between performer and spectator is renegotiated to construct the "spect-actor"; and Image Theatre, in which participants become aware of themselves simultaneously existing in the world and witnessing themselves engaging with the world. The term is often understood in general terms as referring to simultaneously existing in the real and the imagined, facilitated by theatrical practice. Warren Linds (2006) expands on this definition to include considerations of metaxis in the natural world. This includes drawing on scholars such as Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to link Boal's metaxis to biological systems such as ants self-organizing into anthills, in which "the function of

each component is to participate in the production or transformation of the set of relations" (Linds 2006, 116). Linds also draws on Fritjof Capra's distinction between designed and emergent systems, and his argument for thinking systematically in order to tap into the metaxic space of the web of interconnections within and between humans and the world. For Linds, considering Boal's metaxis through the lens of biological systems and systemic analysis contributes to comprehending and utilizing the liberatory potential of theatrical processes. By foregrounding the ways in which systems, of which we are always a part, change, we can harness that potential for change by embracing the "groundlessness" of being liberated from an ontological either/or perspective (Maturana and Varela quoted in Linds 2006, 115).

This linking of Boalian theatrical metaxis to the material world of humans/animals/systems resonates both with Bennett's (2010) call to reconsider nonorganic/organic boundaries and the false equating of life and agency solely to the latter, and with Margolies' (2015) framing of theatrical use of formless materials as extending human stories in time and space. By considering Abed's performance with the map as a metaxic system, Abed and the map are embedded together in the decay of the map and the stakes of this decay for Abed. They are part of one material process within which the lens of focus can be trained on, for example, the material decay of the map—accelerated by Abed's performance with it—or on the process of Abed negotiating his identity within official non-recognition. What is crucial here is that both events are material processes and systems within which the object and the human are intertwined: Abed's identity is threatened with the status of detritus alongside the map's decay into detritus. A focus on such processes as interconnected dynamic systems, as Linds suggests following Maturana and Varela, sidesteps the foreclosure of meaning and the tendency towards fixed knowledge:

> Groundlessness welcomes the unexpected. Whenever we find ourselves holding tightly to being in a certain place, or seek to control outcomes, the in-between invites us to step into

> "another domain where coexistence takes place" (Maturana and Varela 1992, 246), a both/and rather than an either/or space. When knowing and experiencing are located in the shifting terrain of in-between-ness, new possibilities emerge for action and knowing. (2006, 115)

Abed's performance with the map, as an ongoing process of metaxic repetition, allows for new possibilities of action and knowing. Such a process avoids the foreclosure of meaning that Abed and Deák wished to work against as they created a piece that attempts to resist stereotypes as it transverses overdetermined narrative vectors of political power, contested land, victimization framings, and national and personal identities.

Stereotyped images and decaying photographs

I turn now to Abed's mobilization of photographs within the piece. As discussed above, the piece begins with a PowerPoint presentation that reads as a documentary of sorts, providing context for the forced migration of Abed's family and tracing their movements between refugee camps. This performance mode mimics familiar media framings of historical narratives, and it is easy for the audience to "read" the photographs on the slides as their positions as consumers of media are highly familiar and rehearsed. When Abed later brings out a tattered photo album with similar family pictures and presents puppets with cutouts of the faces of family members from these photographs (Figure 2.5), the position of the spectator is unsettled; this is a personal use of photographs that sits outside of the circulation of images in the media. The intimacy of the setting, a kitchen, and Abed's physical proximity to the audience seated around the table blurs the lines between theatrical event and social interaction, transforming the social relations that constitute this moment of image consumption.

The puppetry furthers this unsettling, as pictures of faces that the audience initially consumed through a familiar documentary-style performance are now a material part of a human

figure animated by Abed. This performatively enacts another moment of double-vision. The stereotyped image is literally combined with a performing object that resists this fixity through both its phenomenological "thereness," to use Andrew Sofer's term (quoted in Posner 2015, 5)—these are carved and painted pieces of wood sitting on the table—and through its status as a puppet, both alive (human subject) and dead (object). As mentioned above, puppetry and object theatre are fertile sites for the unsettling of flattened representation through their double status as alive/dead, human/object. When Abed presents a puppet with a photograph of a face that we have previously seen in its stereotyped form, the stereotype itself becomes unsettled, simultaneously retaining and disrupting its fixed associations. It is in this space of unsettled doubling, I suggest, that a useful critical remapping can occur.

At the end of the piece, following the story of his father's death, Abed places a painted wooden box on the table. He lifts one side of the box, places the puppet figure of his father inside, and gently closes it (Figure 2.6). He turns the box around to reveal windows, then begins turning a handle causing photographs to scroll across the windows on the inside of the box (Figure 2.7).

This is an object that Abed has been exploring in Dafa's work for several years. He describes it as a nineteenth and early twentieth-century form of Arabic storytelling with multiple names, primarily *Sandook aldonia*, literally translated as "life box." Other names include *Sandook alajab* or "wonder box," and *Sandook alfurja* or "watching box" (2017). In workshops, Dafa uses the *Sandook aldonia* to facilitate participants telling stories from their lives by placing photographs inside the box, then using the handle to scroll the images across the windows as they tell their stories. In *The Smooth Life,* Abed used the *Sandook aldonia* to wordlessly tell the story of his father in the moments of his death, visually representing the idea of one's life flashing before their eyes. By placing the puppet of his father inside the *Sandook aldonia,* the box becomes his coffin.

Layered with the scrolling images of his life, the box is simultaneously a coffin and a "life box"; Abed emphasizes that "this is our [family's] life box, this is our life." The box here with its windows opening onto photographic images suggests the screen on which media images are displayed and from which they are consumed within a circulation of the stereotype. The presence of the physical box and its hand-operated scrolling mechanism opening onto a view of print photographs detaches the "screen" from its mediatized economy, inviting spectators to witness and consume the photographs in a different way. The presence of the puppet of Abed's father inside the box adds an additional layer of materiality to the photographs, providing an actual depth to the "screen" that masks a body.

In addition to these symbolic connections to death, Abed's use of physical photographs in the piece can also be linked to detritus, as the photographs are decaying. The process of converting physical photographs to digital form for media presentation freezes the process of decay, effectively removing the materiality of the object from the realm of life, aging, and death. Margolies (2015) notes the potential of material performance that foregrounds the "unseen liveliness of matter," arguing that "[r]ather than attempting to create an illusion of life in the lifeless, such performances highlight the process of humans noticing and responding to fundamental material properties, as well as the variety of possible interactions between humans and the material world" (322-3). In this case, the fundamental material properties of the photographs are again doubled: they are both material objects that are becoming faded, creased, and torn, and faces of Abed's family members who have, since the taking of the photograph, aged and/or died. They carry material and affective traces of their travels with Abed and his family. In their representation on the PowerPoint, the audience knows to consume them as historical artifacts, representations of a fixed past. As components of the puppets on the table, they are material

witnesses to Abed's story that are aging and decaying in the moment of performance, occupying an ontological space outside of the fixity of media-driven representation. Having already been scanned into digital format, the photographs are detritus. They no longer have functional use; yet in this moment of performance, they are inextricably bound with Abed's personal narrative and physical presence, inseparable from his own aging body in the room.

Conclusion

In *The Smooth Life*, the potential of material performance to unsettle processes of exclusion is harnessed through processes of doubling and ontological instability. Processes of exclusion that are addressed in the piece include national and identity erasure, overdetermined narratives that foreclose multiple meanings, and the reduction of objects to "mere things," each of which enacts an abjection that produces human and material detritus. I have suggested that Abed and Deák made strategic use of the materials to subvert, interrupt, and deftly work around stereotypes grounded in and producing abjected bodies in order for Abed to trace a personal, flexible, and shifting story through a landscape of fixities of meaning. Rice functions both as a metaphor for family and abjected bodies, and as food that is ingested by Abed and the audience in a process that enacts a reversal of abjection. The physical, concrete presence of an officially unsanctioned map that asserts Abed's identity as a Palestinian refugee functions as both a material assertion of identity and as a transformative space of metaxis within which identity is continually negotiated. Abed deploys photographs in a mode of familiar, fixed media images, and subverts this mode of image consumption by placing material photographs in the performance space. This subversion is additionally layered with the material properties and processes of the photographs that carry traces of Abed's past as they age and decay.

Material performance in *The Smooth Life* has two functions in resisting and subverting stereotypes. The first function focuses on the strategic use of the material object by the human performer to produce particular affects and perceptions. The latter focuses on the material properties of both the object and the human body, on what these multiple materials *do* in the performance space as they operate together as an interconnected system of transformation and decay through which affect and perception circulate and, potentially, shift. This dual function marks Brown's (2001, 4) distinction between "objects" and "things" in which closer attention to the ways in which the object asserts itself as a thing allows for an understanding of the object as not merely an object separate from the subject, but as a particular subject-object relation. This distinction is key to the emerging deployments of thing theory and new materialisms in theatre and performance studies. In *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things*, Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy (2014) suggest that "Where this work (possibly) departs from its historical predecessors is in the willingness of human artists and audiences to listen to and act on object lessons and to rethink their relationship with nonhuman entities" (3).

In this analysis I have sought both to focus on Abed and Deák's strategic use of materials in the performance, and to consider the ways in which a focus on the "object lessons" in the piece layered these strategies with meanings enmeshed in material processes which incorporate ontologies of human and object. Both arenas of focus are ways of paying attention to the material in the space, following Brown's (2001, 1-2) metaphor drawn from A.S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* of shifting one's focus from looking *through* a window, the functional use of the object, to looking instead *at* it and seeing the dirt on the glass. Practitioners of puppetry and object theatre inherently pay attention to materials as they manipulate them to create perceptions and affects. By deepening and sharpening this to include an attentiveness to materiality and the ways in which

both puppetry and object theatre are modes of material performance, the human subject is brought into relation with the materials in the piece. This disrupts the process of fixing meaning central to the stereotype, in this case towards refugee bodies, both by asking audience members to linger with the affects and perceptions produced by ontologically destabilized detritus, and by disrupting models of inclusion/exclusion that incorporates the full spectrum of materiality in the space.

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