

Nordic Research in Music Education

Original Article | Vol. 1, No. 1, 2020, pp. 4–28 | ISSN: 2703-8041

Music, agency, and social transformation

Processes of subjectivation in a Palestinian community music program

Kim Boeskov

Affiliation: Danish School of Education, Aarhus University

Contact corresponding author: kibo@au.dk

Abstract

In this article, a community music program in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon is explored by means of ethnographic methods of participant observation and semistructured interviews. Judith Butler's notion of subjectivation is employed in an analysis of how the participants are constituted as national subjects in and through the musical practice. By analyzing the specific instances of agency that this constitution entails, it is argued that even as the musical practice works to consolidate established norms of national belonging and identity, it also enables participants to resignify Palestinian identity in ways that counter experiences of marginalization, exceed certain social norms, and expand the categories through which their existence becomes meaningful. Conceiving a community music practice as a subjectivating practice may prove useful for scholars seeking to analyze musical-social work in terms of its capacity for social transformation, while retaining a critical perspective on the formative and socially reproductive character of such practices.

Keywords: *community music, Palestinian refugees, subjectivation, agency, social transformation*

Introduction

Since 2003, children and youth from the Palestinian refugee camp Rashidieh in Lebanon have had the chance to participate in a community music program. The Palestinian NGO *Beit Atfal Assumoud* (BAS) directs the program in cooperation with Norwegian music educators, providing 40–80 children and young people with instrument tuition, orchestra playing, and dance training, two days a week. Five local teachers lead the activities, and the

Norwegian partners visit the project three to four times per year to support the staff and administration. The repertoire consists of Palestinian and Arabic music as well as Norwegian folk and pop songs, and a couple of Beatles tunes that the Norwegians introduced. The dance group performs the traditional Arabic-Palestinian folk dance *dabke*, a communal dance that also has been adapted into a presentational form. Such dances and Palestinian music are performed in the BAS social center on various occasions, most importantly at commemorative events the institution hosts in order to mark important dates in recent Palestinian history. In this way, the music program serves a range of social and cultural purposes. It provides a safe environment in which to engage in cultural activities, facilitates intercultural encounters between Norwegians and Palestinians, and functions as an important site for national identification for the exiled community.

As with other musical-social work,¹ the community music program in Rashidieh is based on a belief in musical participation as a means of empowering disadvantaged individuals and groups, enhancing their personal well-being, and creating some kind of sustainable betterment. This belief has been substantiated by research evaluating the program. Considering the program as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), Vegar Storsve, Inger Anne Westbye, and Even Ruud (2012) state that the music program offers the participants “a repertoire of roles which will partly challenge the limits they usually meet and which will open new possibilities and thus a hope about how to shape their own future” (79). In a study concerning the potential health benefits of the program, Ruud writes that the adolescents engaged in the program “have experienced a markedly positive effect upon their sense of vitality, agency and belonging, as well as their felt meaning and hope for the future—in other words, they have experienced positive health effects” (Ruud, 2012, p. 91; see also Ruud, 2011). Likewise, in my own study of the program’s cultural-exchange activities where Palestinian and Norwegian music students perform together, I argue that this intercultural collaboration allows for experiences of recognition and mutuality that challenge the Palestinians’ prevailing feelings of neglect and marginalization (Boeskov, 2013).

According to these studies, a primary outcome of the music program is the transformational agency the participants gain as they intentionally use music for transcending limitations and changing aspects of their psychological state or social environment. These studies therefore place themselves within a paradigm that dominates not only social analyses of musical-social work but also the related fields of music education, music psychology, and music sociology. Sidsel Karlsen’s (2011) review of the notion of musical agency within these fields shows how agency in musical practice is frequently connected to empowering processes of self-regulation and identity formation, through which individuals and groups

1 Following Gary Ansdell (2014, p. 193), I use the term “musical-social work” to refer to musical practices that respond to social problems. Such practices are often connected to the field of community music, community music therapy or inspired by the Venezuelan music program El Sistema.

explore, navigate, and transform their social worlds. Without diminishing the usefulness of this perspective and the insight it may provide into the potential for music to effect positive change, I argue that emphasizing how musical agents intentionally use music as a resource for “world building” (DeNora, 2003, p. 46) entails a danger of disregarding how musical participation that seemingly enables people to transform their social worlds may, at the same time, depend on, and therefore reinforce, wider social and institutional formations that reproduce social constraints and inequalities (Boeskov, 2018). In order to account more fully for music’s social impact, it is important to consider not only how music contributes to positive change but also how particular musical practices, due to their social and institutional embeddedness, construct the terms under which such changes can be pursued.

In connection to the music activities in Rashidieh, I have recently argued that the social effects of this program cannot be reduced to the positive changes reported in the earlier studies of the program mentioned above (Boeskov, accepted; see also Boeskov, 2019). Pursuing such positive changes through musical participation subjects the participants to specific socially and institutionally sanctioned versions of Palestinian identity and forms of belonging that may not fully resemble the lived experiences of the third- and fourth-generation refugees growing up in Lebanon. In this way, the valuable experiences of belonging and agency offered through the music program can be said to rely on the participants’ identification with a particular national narrative that downplays or excludes alternative categories and dimensions by means of which the young Palestinians can construct meaningful self-perceptions.

The present article expands upon this assertion in two ways. First, I apply Judith Butler’s notion of subjectivation (1997b) in an analysis of the music program in Rashidieh, to explain how participants not only gain agency through the musical practice but also are constituted as subjects in and through their musical actions. By conceptualizing the musical practice as a subjectivating practice, the way that agency is tied to the social norms that underlie the musical practice becomes clearer. Second, I expand Butler’s framework with the perspectives offered by Saba Mahmood (2005), who conceptualizes agency not only as the ability to subvert social norms but also by thinking how specific practices allow for ways of inhabiting norms. What interests me, then, is whether and how music making offers the young Palestinians specific modes of inhabiting, performing, and (potentially) subverting the social norms to which they are subjected.

As an alternative to the dominant conception of musical agency, which emphasizes music as a resource for social transformation, conceiving the musical practice as a subjectivating practice implies that subjectivities and socialities are constituted in discursive practice and, therefore, enabled and constrained by social and institutional norms. While the dominant conception stresses the ability of musical agents to intentionally transform aspects of their social worlds (i.e. transcend social norms), considering such processes as subjectivating practices draws attention to how the intentions, desires, and emotions of

agents are socially constituted. Recent music education scholarship has used this conceptual framework to explore how notions of gender and musicianship are discursively constituted in music education practices (see e.g. Ellefsen, 2014; Onsrud, 2013). By analyzing a community music program as a subjectivating practice, I attempt to render this analytical perspective useful for considering the social effects of musical-social work. I argue that this move offers a productive path for music educators seeking to develop nuanced understandings of such work, because it allows the analyst to explore how agents intentionally put music to use in pursuing their own interests, while retaining a critical view of the socially reproductive and formative character of the musical practice. Without disavowing the potential for individuals and groups to utilize music as a means of social transformation, this analytical approach implies a sense of “constrained agency” (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, p. 40), helpful in avoiding the temptation to idealize music’s transformative powers.

Subjectivation and agency

By processes of subjectivation (sometimes referred to as “subjection”), Butler refers to the process in which a subject is subordinated by power and simultaneously becomes a self-knowing and capable subject in and through this constituting power. In this sense, Butler follows Michel Foucault, who posits that the human subject is produced in discourse, through and within relations of power. Foucault (1982) distinguishes between three forms of power (and the struggles against them): forms of domination, forms of exploitation, and forms of subjection. Of the last, Foucault (1982) writes:

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him [*sic*] by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to. (781)

It is to this subjectivating power that the later Foucault and Butler give attention, a form of power that should be seen not only as an oppressive force, but one that in significant ways also forms and activates the subject.² As Butler (1997b) writes, “[s]ubjection consists

2 Foucault’s ideas of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) are primarily developed in *The History of Sexuality Volumes 1 and 2, Discipline and Punish*, and the essays *Two Lectures* and *The Subject and Power* published in *Power/Knowledge*. See Butler (1997b, p. 16).

precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency” (2).

Butler’s view of subjectivation and agency is connected to her notion of gender performativity. In her books, *Gender Trouble* (1999) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993/2011), Butler develops a notion of gender as performative, a position that construes gender not as “a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler, 1999, p. 179). These repetitive and ritualized acts are the materialization of gender norms that force themselves upon the individual as a compulsory practice that regulates the subject, “who is compelled to ‘cite’ the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject” (Butler, 1993/2011, p. 177). This does not mean that the subject is determined by discourse, nor does it preclude any sense of agency. However, as Butler explains, agency must be understood as exercised from within rather than from a position outside of discourse. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of subjectivation, she writes:

In this sense, the agency denoted by the performativity of “sex” will be directly counter to any notion of a voluntarist subject who exists quite apart from the regulatory norms which she/he opposes. The paradox of subjectivation (*assujettissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.

(Butler, 1993/2011, p. xxii)

Butler adopts the notion of “reiteration” from Jacques Derrida’s (1988) critique of J. L. Austin’s (1962) speech-act theory. Rather than relying on social convention, Derrida locates the force of the speech act in the break with its prior context that a performative utterance entails. For Butler, this idea becomes significant for explaining the transformational potential of performative action. As the regulatory norms must constantly be reenacted in order to sustain their legitimacy and social power, this reiterative structure becomes vulnerable to false or wrong invocations of social rituals. Thus, norms can be resisted, because they are always vulnerable to being repeated in subversive ways that reveal their constructed and arbitrary nature. The point to emphasize here, however, is not just the possibility of agency and resistance, but the location of this possibility within the regulatory norms, insofar as these norms enable the subject to come into social existence in the first place. As Butler (1999) writes, “[t]he task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (189). In this way, the reiterative structure consolidates social norms, but also allows for their “undoing.” The political promise of the performative is the

possibility of unsettling and destabilizing norms in ways that, over time, may break their hegemony (Butler, 1997a).

As Butler's writing is situated within a feminist political project, her notion of agency is primarily located in the potential for resignifying and subverting (heterosexual) norms. However, as Mahmood (2005) points out, the consequence of this conceptualization is to ground a social analysis of power and agency in a dualistic framework, in which norms are either reiterated or resignified. Expanding this model, Mahmood (2005) contends that "[n]orms are not only consolidated and/or subverted, ... but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways" (22). Analyzing a women's mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood (2005) considers how the subordination to religious authority that secular feminists might read as acts of subordination to male domination, instead could be read as a form of agency "that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment" (15). As Mahmood explains, by realizing piety, these women countered several structures of authority, including instituted standards of Islam and male domination. However, Mahmood (2005) argues that "the *rationale* behind these conflicts was not predicated upon, and therefore cannot be understood only by reference to, arguments for gender equality or resistance to male authority" (15). Therefore, in order to capture this sense of agency, Mahmood (2005) turns away from a dualistic framework of reiteration/subversion and analyzes "the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated," which, as she explains, "requires that we explore the relationship between the immanent form a normative act takes, the model of subjectivity it presupposes (specific articulations of volition, emotion, reason, and bodily expression), and the kinds of authority upon which such an act relies" (23).

Thinking of the musical practice as a subjectivating practice allows for consideration of how musical performance contributes to constituting subjects within relations of power in the social field. Further, the implied vulnerability due to the reiterative structure of the performative constitution points to a subversive potential, the possibility of resignifying and undoing norms through musical actions. Mahmood's extension of this model opens for consideration how musical practices may not only be mapped on a binary axis of doing/undoing norms. Instead, musical practices can be explored in terms of how they offer specific ways of inhabiting social norms, and how participants intentionally negotiate their subjectivities by drawing on various sources of legitimacy and authority within the social field. In this text, I apply this framework in an analysis of the Palestinian music program in order to explain how the participants are constituted through their musical actions, with particular attention to the musical practice as a site for national identification. Further, I explore how this constitution implies specific forms of agency, in that musical performances become socially significant ways of resisting marginalization and resignifying Palestinian identity. Finally, I discuss some examples of how the participants intentionally

draw upon various sources of authority and legitimacy in the music program for negotiating their subjectivities and expanding their possibilities for action.

Methodology

In 2012, I worked as a music teacher in the Palestinian music program for eight months, which gave me intimate knowledge of the program, its participants, and the social context in which the participants live. In 2016 and 2018, I returned to the refugee camp for shorter periods of time (four visits of one to two weeks each) to do an ethnographic study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) of the program. This study included participant observation (Spradley, 1980) of week-to-week activities and performances, and semistructured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) with sixteen music program participants, three teachers, one social worker and one administrator from the organization running the music program, as well as a few formal and informal interviews with young Palestinians from that camp and neighboring camps. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the significance of the music program in the local context, what it means to participate, how the music activities relate to broader social, cultural, and political issues for the Palestinian refugees, and how the music program might contribute to positive change. All names used in this article are pseudonyms. In order to ensure my research participants' anonymity, potentially revealing personal information has been omitted or changed. All interviewees were selected by me in order to secure diversity in terms of gender, age, and experience in the program. All research participants gave informed consent. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data reviewed and approved the research design.³

The empirical data was analyzed in three stages. To get well acquainted with the data, the first stage of analysis consisted of close reading and preliminary coding of interview transcripts and field notes. During this stage, themes related to Palestinian identity and belonging appeared as the most promising starting points for understanding the social significance of the music program, especially since I encountered some expressions of ambiguity toward issues of national identity that called for closer scrutiny. Interviews were then re-read and a couple of new interviews were conducted in light of the preliminary findings and relevant anthropological literature concerning the Palestinian community that focuses specifically on issues of national identification and belonging (Allan, 2014, 2018; Hammer, 2005; Khalili 2004, 2007; McDonald, 2013; Peteet, 2005; Sayigh, 1979, 1994; Schulz, 1999, 2003). The focus of this reading was to understand the cultural information the research participants draw upon when talking about their participation in the music

3 Additional discussions of the methodology as well as the ethical issues pertaining to this research can be found in Boeskov (2019).

program. The reading resulted in a discussion of how the music program is connected to a specific national narrative and the potentially ambivalent experiences this might produce (Boeskov, accepted). In the third stage of analysis, which is presented in this article, I engage in a more theoretically informed reading of the data, in which I conceive the music program as a subjectivating practice that constitutes the participants as (national) subjects. Here, I pay attention to the discourses concerning national representation that circulate within the music program, how these discourses presuppose specific subjectivities, and how participants negotiate, inhabit, or perform these subject positions. Further, I look at how the participants gain agency through their constitution as national subjects and how they intentionally utilize this constitution to expand or challenge the terms of their subjectivation.

This approach demands that I take seriously how my own participation in the social field becomes a part of the subjectivating processes I study. As an outsider, a representative of the Norwegian partner institutions, and a member of the Global North, I cannot claim to inhabit a neutral or objective position in the social field. Rather, in and through my involvement as a teacher and researcher in the program, I constitute the research participants in specific ways. Both the research practice and the musical practice are subjectivating practices, and although they are radically different ways of becoming a subject, I argue that in this case, these processes could very well be seen as continuous. The interviews as well as the musical activities can be regarded as performative spaces through which the participants are constituted as national subjects. When the interviewees talk to me about their experiences in the program, they appear not only as individuals but also as representatives of the Palestinian refugees. However, relying on Butler's notion of discursive agency (Butler, 1997a, p. 127ff), I maintain that although they contribute to the regulation of discourse, processes of subjectivation do not determine the subjects. As I will make explicit in the following analysis, the musical practice (as well as the research practice) entails various possibilities of inhabiting, performing, and subverting the subjectivities that become available to the participants.⁴

Further, I am aware that the national discourse, which I see as fundamental for understanding how subjects come to be in and through the musical activities, is not the only discourse to which the participants are subjected. Rather, they are subjected to multiple discourses, and, as Foucault (1982) reminds us, these discourses "are superimposed, they cross, impose their own limits, sometimes cancel one another out, sometimes reinforce one another" (793). I do not pretend to conduct an exhaustive analysis of the discourses that constitute the music program participants (nor would that be possible). The analysis conducted here can never be more than a partial and provisional account of the music

4 See Boeskov (accepted) for an example of how some of the participants challenged their constitution as national subjects by using irony during an interview.

program and its participants, limited by the researcher's position in the field and interpretive repertoire. Yet, I maintain that these interpretations are recognizable, and that they do offer a glimpse of what is at stake in this particular musical practice and how we might understand its effects.

The music program as a subjectivating practice

Rāji' yā filasṭīn (Palestine, I am returning)⁵

Palestine, I am returning

To my house/home⁶ of clay and stone

We will plant jasmine flowers

and water them with the tears from our eyes

Palestine, I am returning

I am returning

I have had enough of separation

The distance is hard to bear

I am missing my home

I am returning, full of love

Palestine, I am returning

The song is playing from a mobile phone while Omar and his teacher Abu Ali listen attentively as they try to work out something for Omar to play on his violin. Omar is one of the oldest students in the program. With eight years of experience, he is also one of the more skilled participants, with responsibility for teaching some of the younger violinists. This afternoon, the youngest students have gone home, and while the *dabke* group is training in the music hall, a few of the teachers and a group of experienced students have gathered in a small room to work on a new piece. The song is called *Rāji' yā filasṭīn* (Palestine, I am returning), and the group plans to perform it at a big event held in commemoration of *al Nakba*, where Palestinians from all over Lebanon will gather to commemorate the expulsion of more than 700,000 Palestinians from their ancestral homeland in May 1948. It has become a custom within the BAS institution in Rashidieh to have students from the music program perform national songs and dances at these events. Thanks to these performances, BAS has become famous in the camp for hosting the most spectacular and entertaining commemorations.

5 The song *Rāji' yā filasṭīn* (Palestine, I am returning) is written by the Palestinian artist Hassan Sultan. Lyrics are translated by Sofie Lausten Mortensen.

6 The Arabic word *bayt* carries the double meaning of *house* and *home*.

Commemorative events are important in Palestinian social life. As public manifestations of a Palestinian collective identity with legitimate claims to the homeland, commemorations function as sites of national education, they embody the resilience and perseverance of the Palestinian people and convey a sense of agency of the otherwise silenced community (Allan, 2014; Khalili, 2007). As one of the teachers explains, performing joyful music and dance is a symbol of such resilience and agency:

So, when we dance at the occasions [commemorating the massacres of] Sabra and Shatila, Tel al-Za'tar and Palestinian Land Day or the *Nakba*, that means that the Palestinians are not dead after that massacre. They are still here. And the spirit is still here. And they were living peacefully everywhere, and they will stay in a peaceful way. And they still strive for what they want, I mean the rights [to go] back to Palestine. This is why we use *dabke* and music in all of these occasions.

The songs and dances performed at such events emphasize the Palestinians' primordial attachment to the land of Palestine, underlining the legitimacy of the Palestinian claim to the right of return. The lyrics that open this section are characteristic of the imagery used in commemorative performances. The "I" is longing for the homeland, which is depicted in primordial terms as a house of stone and clay. The jasmine flower, a symbol of the Palestinian land, will be planted and watered by tears, a symbol of both joy and sorrow. This picture underscores the symbiosis between the people and the land that springs to life and feeds on this deep emotional connection. Another significant characteristic is the assertion that "I am returning," giving the impression of an action already underway, an inevitable journey—although in the present realities, this inevitability seems more implausible than ever before.

Omar is a regular performer on these occasions, and in an interview he talks about his feelings about these performances: "Sure, we are proud," he tells me, "also to show our parents that we do not come [to the music program] to be entertained, we come to learn. We stay with our goals: to remember Palestine." For Omar, musical performance is not just a display of his musical skills, but, more importantly, performing national songs is a display of loyalty toward a central social imperative in the Palestinian community: to remember Palestine. In this way, in the context of commemorative events, performing music is also a performance of a continued attachment to the Palestinian nation (see also Boeskov, accepted).

By performing national songs, the music program participants are constituted as national subjects, a performance that not only marks them as Palestinians, but also conveys to them what it means to be Palestinian. Within a Butlerian framework, such performances cannot be understood as an expression of pre-existing national identity, although this is the standard interpretation I have encountered among the Palestinians. As Butler (1999) suggests (with respect to gender but the point applies to nationality as well), "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). The

musical acts are iterations of a particular form of national belonging that performatively constitutes the participants as “ideal” Palestinians, i.e. as national subjects that in spite of being born in a foreign country, carry with them a natural longing for their real home. As I have argued elsewhere, even though most participants seem to identify with the form of national belonging mediated by the music activities, this notion of unceasing attachment to the lost homeland may not fully resemble the lived experiences of third- and fourth-generation refugees growing up in Lebanon (Boeskov, accepted). The musical practice constructs and imposes a particular model of Palestinian subjectivity, which affords specific kinds of actions, articulations, and frames of belonging, and discourages others. Thereby, musical performances contribute to regulating the “social domain of speakable discourse,” (Butler, 1997a, p. 133), i.e., the desires, ambitions, and emotions that can be recognized as valid expressions of “the national” or of “resistance.”

For the Palestinian refugees, asserting their national identity through performances of Palestinian music and dance is a way of struggling against the dominating forces to which they are subjected, e.g., the State of Israel and the Lebanese government, which keep them in a marginal position, barred from entry into the land they consider their homeland and deprived of fundamental civil rights in Lebanon. The processes of subjectivation described above are tied to the Palestinians’ subjection to these external forces of domination; however, they cannot be said to be a direct consequence of them. Foucault (1982) states that “mechanisms of subjection cannot be studied outside their relation to the mechanisms of exploitation and domination.” But, he continues, “they [processes of subjection] do not merely constitute the ‘terminal’ of more fundamental mechanisms. They entertain complex and circular relations with other forms” (782). Therefore, subjectivation in the musical practice cannot be seen to derive directly from the structures of domination within which the Palestinians live. While they certainly are a response to this domination, these relations do not determine the articulations of cultural identity and resistance. Rather, the practice forms and makes possible specific kinds of actions as valid reactions to experiences of marginalization and dispossession, which again produces specific kinds of subjectivities.

The musical practice provides the participants with a model of Palestinian subjectivity that is freely taken up and appropriated.⁷ It is an ideal whose consummation, as Omar also points out in the quote above, is socially recognized by parents and the wider community as a desirable attainment precisely because it provides the means for resistance toward broader structures of domination. Accepting their constitution as national subjects, the participants become what Mahmood (2001) refers to as *docile agents*. In Mahmood’s usage, docility does not point to subordination or an abandonment of agency, but rather an ability to be taught, which “implies the malleability required of someone to be instructed in a

7 As Foucault reminds us, subjection necessitates a free subject: “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free” (Foucault, 1982, p. 790).

particular skill or knowledge” (210). Mahmood uses the example of a pianist who actively subjects herself to the hierarchy of apprenticeship and standards of performance in order to obtain the necessary skills to play the instrument with mastery. By accepting the terms by which they are constituted, the participants acquire valuable tools through which they can engage in socially legitimate ways of resisting marginalization. However, as I will explore below, this agency can be extended to idiosyncratic purposes as well.

As noted above, while Butler (1997b) discusses the possibilities of a subject that “turns away from the law, resisting its lure of identity” (130) and resignifies the terms through which the subject comes into existence, Mahmood (2005) seeks to expand Butler’s project by rejecting its dualistic frame of the doing/undoing of norms, and replacing it with considerations of “the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated” (23). Following Mahmood, I suggest that musical performance is not just a performance of norms, but a specific way of *inhabiting* these norms. It is not just the participants in the music program who are subjected to norms of national sentiment. These ideals affect all Palestinians in Lebanon to various degrees. What interests me is how the music activities imply a way of inhabiting and experiencing this norm and the particular modes of agency these activities entail. In the following, therefore, I turn to an exploration of how participants draw on various sources of legitimacy and authority within the norms, in order to exercise agency and intentionally negotiate or expand the discourses within which they are constituted.

Resignifying Palestinian identity

Musical performances constitute the participants as Palestinians, and while I argue that this process implies imposing a specific model of national belonging, the participants also receive socially significant positions as representatives of the Palestinians. Taking up this position involves agency over how the category of the Palestinian is represented and thereby how ‘the Palestinian’ can be perceived, both by the participants themselves and by significant others. One of the teachers explained to me how musical performances challenge typical representations of Palestinians in the media:

Yeah, I mean here, because the media, the media they always give a bad picture of the Palestinians, of the kids. Of the Palestinian kids. And always they tell: the Palestinians are like terrorists. But we are not like that, so we like to show: this is the real Palestinian picture.

Disproving the negative image of the Palestinians is significant in terms of global politics, but also in the local context in which the Palestinians have a turbulent and strained relationship with the Lebanese community. A BAS senior official explains:

You know, we had before a bad experience with the Lebanese, we had war. Now, what I will say, music and dancing is the second face [an alternative image] of the Palestinian, which we show to the Lebanese communities. We attend the different Lebanese festivals to show that the Palestinians are human beings like you, you know. Not all Palestinians are criminals or just using guns. No, we are human beings like others. And I think in this way we have succeeded. Because we show the face of the real Palestinian.

Several participants also pointed to the way musical performance allows them to represent the Palestinian refugees in ways that contradict how they are normally portrayed. One example is fifteen-year-old Batoul, who has participated in cultural-exchange activities in Norway and regularly performs at commemorations in the BAS center. She emphasizes how musical performance depicts the Palestinians as capable and talented people: “It is really nice to make a performance to present Palestine and show that we, the Palestinian people, have talents. [...] [W]e have something to show even though we are from the [refugee] camps.”

The statements above point not only to musical performance as a representation of the Palestinian people, but also to its capacity to resignify the Palestinian identity. By connecting Palestinian resistance to culture and music, rather than guns and violence, the music program participants enter a struggle for how Palestinian identity is perceived. In the three quotes above, the term Palestinian is associated with “terrorist,” “criminal,” and “refugee.” However, representing the Palestinian identity through music counters these notions and shows “the face of the real Palestinian” as a capable human being. Notably, these possibilities for self-constitution are connected to performances in which the Palestinians represent themselves in front of constitutive Others, whether at Lebanese festivals or in the context of cultural-exchange activities with Norwegian peers. On such occasions, musical performance is accepted as a legitimate expression of Palestinian identity, and this subjectivating practice allows for a resignification of Palestinian identity. In these processes, the Palestinians rely on discourses in which musical ability and cultural expression are connected to “humanness,” and thereby oppose the more common connections made between the Palestinians and denigrating terms that legitimate the continued marginalization of the Palestinians.

While the statements above show how musical performance resignifies Palestinian identity, they also point to the way in which national identity is considered the primary category through which the musical performers come into being. By performing the “face of the real Palestinian,” the participants subject themselves to these terms as the foundation for their social existence. Thereby, they also implicitly accept the norms of Palestinian subjectivity, entailing an unceasing attachment to and longing for the land of Palestine. As already noted, young Palestinians born and raised in the camps in Lebanon may experience the imperative of “remembering Palestine” ambivalently. Part of this ambivalence stems

from the stories of persecution, marginalization, and violence that the Palestinians living inside Palestine are currently experiencing. While all Palestinians face daily hardships in the camps in Lebanon, in the minds of many young Palestinians, the land of Palestine may not present a better alternative. Hanin, a singer in her late teens and an experienced member of the program, talks about this issue, and how the music program helps the younger children remember and represent Palestine in a positive way to themselves as well as to others:

Hanin: If the parents start talking about the bad things [happening to] children in Palestine, they [the children in Rashidieh] will be afraid: Oh, there are many bad things happening there. But if we help the children to sing and play traditional songs, especially the songs that have a scenario involving a boy and a girl and a love story between them, [...] it will help them to remember these things in a nice way. That our country is very nice, not that it contains always bombs and killing and fighting. No, there are some nice places in Palestine.

Interviewer: So, it is also a way of remembering or being Palestinian in a positive way?

Hanin: Yeah, in a positive way, not always in a negative way. [...] Especially if you are talking to a child. You cannot talk with them about blood and your enemy, make them afraid. No, start to help them to remember something nice.

Interviewer: And this is also something that the music program does, creates a positive identity for the Palestinians? And maybe also towards the Norwegians or to people outside the camps, that Palestinians ...

Hanin: Of course. When I go there [to Norway] and I start translating to them the words or the lyrics, they say: Oh, the Palestinians are very nice, the communication [way of talking], the relation there is very nice. I say: Yes, not everything is as you saw in the media.

In this way, musical performance enables the participants to present to themselves and to others a positive image of Palestinian identity. Being granted a scene for self-representation by a constitutive Other enables the Palestinians to constitute themselves in more desirable ways. I maintain that these processes should be considered as ambivalent in that they subject the participants to a specific version of Palestinian identity that entails a particular frame of belonging. Nevertheless, the music activities seem to allow the young Palestinians to experience the social norms of remembering Palestine as a source for their agency, enabling them to represent Palestine in a positive way. While the music activities do not enable the participants to engage in a radical form of self-creation that subverts such norms, they do allow for ways of inhabiting established norms of Palestinian subjectivity that are experienced as meaningful and empowering.

Performing gender

An understanding of music and agency in the context of the Palestinian music program can be extended by considering how the music program mediates gender relations and norms. The BAS organization operates according to a liberal and secular agenda that stresses gender equality and the inclusion of girls and women in the public and cultural life of the Palestinian community. In all of the music program activities, boys and girls perform and dance together. However, the Rashidieh camp is considered one of the more conservative Palestinian communities in Lebanon, maintaining traditional gender relations and customs and separating girls from boys in educational and cultural activities, especially when they become teenagers. While the music program in many ways has successfully established and maintained access for both girls and boys, girls, with a few notable exceptions, are likely to drop out of the program at the age of sixteen or seventeen. Girls at this age are expected to prepare themselves for marriage and therefore to exhibit behavior associated with respectable femininity in order to appear as proper candidates for marriage. The traditionalists in the camp associate music and dance with frivolity and immodesty, which means that some of the young women are discouraged or prohibited from participating in the program.

Hanin is one of the few examples of female participants who continue playing music throughout their adolescence. In my interview with her, this topic was brought up:

Interviewer: There are a lot of girls participating in the music project, but I also know that some people in the camp are a little bit sceptical about girls playing music. Especially, maybe, when they are as old as you, many girls do not come to the music project any more.

Hanin: Because of their parents.

Interviewer: Yeah, can you tell me something about this, and what is your own experience?

Hanin: Actually, yes, you are right. There are many parents here, when the girl is twenty or eighteen, maybe, they say stop singing or stop playing music. It depends, because everyone has his own thinking. But for my family, I think, until now, it is okay for them. Every week I say that I am going, [and they say:] okay, go. And my mother, every event here, she comes and listens to me. She told me yesterday: "You know, I feel proud when you were on the stage." Because I am not singing something bad, I am not wearing something bad, I am wearing my scarf okay, I sing just for my family.⁸ The music, the type of music we play, it is very, eh, kind music, you can say. It is not something bad, or we are making words [that are] not good for the people to hear, no. So I hope my family will not mind, but I don't think so because they trust Beit Atfal Assumoud.

8 Throughout the interview, Hanin referred to the people in BAS as her "second family." Singing just for her family implies that she only sings within this institution.

Hanin's ability to challenge traditional gender norms that dictate that girls her age should not engage in music activities depends on her family's acceptance, which again relies on her appropriation of norms of feminine decency (e.g., not singing something bad, not wearing something bad, wearing my scarf okay, I sing just for my family). As such, even though Hanin's continued participation challenges some gender norms, such as separating girls and boys at a certain age, it rests on the reiteration of other, more fundamental gender norms, such as feminine decency. Also noteworthy in Hanin's account is that her ability to perform outside of the established norms depends on her family trusting BAS, the NGO running the program. Thus, her personal agency is tied to this organization and its social legitimacy.

Another example of a female participant performing outside of established gender norms is found in Brit Ågot Brøske's (2017) study of the music program. In an interview with Daleen, a young woman participating in the program, Brøske discusses how the safe space the institution provides enables girls to exceed social norms:

Interviewer: Did you encounter any difficulties when working with music as a Muslim?

Daleen: Of course. The people talk about that I sing because music in Islam is haram [forbidden]. It is not a good thing to do, especially for women. And I have hijab [Muslim headscarf].

I: What do you mean—"especially for women?"

D: I have hijab.

I: Yes. How does that affect your ability to be involved in music?

D: A woman who has hijab; it means she has to follow the rules of the religion. When she is a musician—a singer—it is haram. But, from my heart, I want to be a singer, and I want it, and I don't care about what people say. And I sing in this centre, and not outside. And of course, I sing good things about Palestine and songs with good purpose. I sing good songs, traditional songs and folksongs. And music is the same—nothing bad, everything good. (Brøske, 2017, pp. 78–79).

From this account, it seems clear that Daleen has side-stepped norms of appropriate conduct for a young Muslim woman. Brøske goes on to explain that it is possible for Daleen to participate in the music activities because of the protection that the BAS center provides. However, it is noteworthy that what makes participation legitimate—and in a broader view, what ensures the trustworthiness of the BAS institution in this context—is that the music is used for a "good purpose" ("I sing good things about Palestine"), in this context, the national cause and the liberation of Palestine. It is the subjection to this cause and the implied subjectivity in performing nationalist music that allow Daleen to exceed social expectations in her conduct as a Muslim woman. The agency of these young women must therefore be placed within social structures of authority and legitimacy. By drawing on various sources

of authority within this framework, Hanin and Daleen are enabled to pursue their interest in music (and the opportunities for self-expression, travelling, and intercultural encounters that come with involvement in the music program). Subjecting themselves to and invoking the authority of Palestinian nationalism enable Hanin and Daleen to negotiate, bend, and exceed the social and religious norms to which they are normally subjected.

Expanding the discourse

The final ethnographic example also illuminates how participants perform in specific ways to live up to social norms, at the same time that they are enabled to exceed those norms and expand the discursive field within which their actions become meaningful. An important resource for such expansions is the connection to Norwegian music educators and the meanings that enter the social contexts through intercultural collaboration. In a previous analysis of the music program (Boeskov, 2018), I refer briefly to Ali, a saxophonist in the music program, who uses music and instruments from the West to establish a relation to an “imagined community” outside of the refugee camp and to feel like “a Western guy.” Here, I explore Ali’s case a bit further to discuss how cultural-exchange activities can be seen as a subjectivating practice, and the forms of agency these processes entail.

Like Omar, Hanin, and Daleen, Ali is a veteran in the music project. He holds leading parts in the music program’s performances at commemorative events, and he has participated on several trips to Norway, representing the program and the Palestinian community. These trips have made a special impact on Ali. When I ask him about his most memorable experiences in the music program, he says:

The most special thing in relation to the music project is that you can travel and discover new cultures, such as Norwegian culture. [...] I have been in Norway three times, so I feel like Norway has become my second homeland.

As I have explored elsewhere (Boeskov, 2013), the cultural-exchange activities are important for the participants not only because they allow for rare opportunities to leave Lebanon and the refugee camp, but also because the intercultural encounters are seen as concrete enactments of mutuality and recognition for which the Palestinian community strives. By engaging with the Palestinians in cultural-exchange activities, the Norwegians show acceptance and recognition of Palestinian culture and identity as legitimate and equal, and this subjectivation allows for positive self-constitution. Musical performance holds a central position in mediating these experiences. When Palestinians and Norwegians perform for and with each other, these practices can be seen as embodiments of mutual friendship and recognition.

While the cultural-exchange activities thus establish a connection across boundaries, at the same time, they implicitly assert these boundaries. The discursive frame established by cultural exchange activities implies a pointing out of what is “Norwegian” and what is “Palestinian” culture. In this way, they inscribe these categories with a cultural essence expressed through musical performance. As discussed above, performing music allows the participants to resignify and attach positive meanings to Palestinian identity. However, at the same time, this identity is reified and placed as the primary category through which the participants gain a form of social existence. Yet, the logic of the cultural-exchange activities presupposes that the different cultural expressions could and should be exchanged, mixed and performed for and with each other, as a sign of mutual respect and recognition. Thus, the cultural-exchange activities are significant because they perform two vital assertions in connection to the Palestinian experience. First, as a site for the performance of Palestinian identity and culture, these activities work to reify the threatened category of “the Palestinian” and communicate how even the young generation embodies an unceasing attachment to the homeland. Second, by placing these expressions alongside Norwegian articulations of identity, the Palestinian cultural identity is framed as equal and legitimate. This performance of cultural authenticity and legitimacy implies membership in a global order of cultures and nations, which in turn authorizes the refugees’ claim of their right to return to Palestine.

In the frame of cultural exchange, the Norwegian music educators have introduced a wide range of music, not only traditional Norwegian songs, but also Norwegian and international pop and rock music. While this music is embraced in its capacity for signifying the friendship between the two communities, Western pop music in general holds an ambiguous status in the camp. Music and other cultural products from the West are often treated with suspicion by older generations, who see such expressions as a threat to local values. As implied in the quotes from Hanin and Daleen above, it is possible to “sing something bad” or to perform “songs with a bad purpose.” Pop music from the West is likely to be associated with morally improper behavior.⁹ However, Ali has developed an affinity for what he calls Western or English music that is at odds with local expectations:

Ali: A lot of people told me that, you are an Arab guy, you should just play Eastern music or Arabic music. I told them, no, I also like the Western culture. I like English music.

Interviewer: But some people say to you, you shouldn’t play this song, you shouldn’t play ...

Ali: Yeah, you should focus more on Arabic music, but I found, no, it is my hobby, I play Western music.

9 In Ruud’s (2011, p. 70) study of the music program in Rashidieh, he expresses surprise that only a few of the participants he interviewed had any relationship at all to Western or Arabic popular music. Instead, they all preferred traditional Palestinian music or traditional music from other countries, including Norway.

Ali's interest in Western music seemingly poses a challenge to existing social norms. While those in his surroundings expect him to play the kind of music that is considered a proper expression of self ("you should just play Eastern music or Arabic music"), Ali insists on playing Western music, because, as he tells me:

Ali: I found it interesting because it is new to me. I know my Arab songs very well, so I can play it, and I know that it is, like, almost similar to me, but I discovered a new kind of music, the Western music, so I became more interested [in this].

Interviewer: So, it is also for your development or for your..., you find it interesting because you can learn more from this music, you feel?

Ali: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you think that it somehow affects your identity or your person to play this music, or is it just for being a better musician? How do you see this?

Ali: Yes, of course, yeah. When you play Western music you find yourself going to the Western world. You feel that you are a Western guy. And if you play Arabic music you find yourself as an Arab guy.

Ali perceives the music he plays as an expression of his identity. As he says: "I know my Arab songs very well [...] it is, like, almost similar to me." Likewise, playing Western music allows Ali to feel like "a Western guy." In this way, performing music allows Ali to momentarily detach himself from established conventions and expressions of identity. Through my connection to Ali on social-media platforms, I have seen how he actively uses music to create and express such a hybrid subjectivity. By posting videos of himself performing international pop hits, Ali aligns himself with an 'international youth culture', and thereby asserts a more complex subjectivity than the one expressed by the prevailing nationalist discourse. I suggest that for Ali, performing Western music is an articulation of an alternative form of belonging, connected to a global youth culture that bears traces of encounters with young people from other places in the world. His performances can in this way be seen as his intentional attempt to expand what it means to be a Palestinian and what aesthetic forms can be combined with this identity.

Such performances are not necessarily subversive, in the sense that they question underlying assumptions of identity. Rather, as Ali's statements suggest, they presuppose an Arab/Western binary set and thereby consolidate such categories as inevitable in coming to terms with one's existence in the world. As indicated at the beginning of this section, Ali readily performs his Palestinian identity at commemorative events and seems in no way to question the frame of national belonging established by the music program. However, as I learned through interviewing him, his taste for Western music and identification as "a Western guy" enable him to expand the discourse through which he is constituted as a (national) subject, even if this expansion is at odds with established norms.

Through the cultural-exchange program, Western music has gained some legitimacy as an acceptable—even valuable—form of cultural expression, at least in the specific social and institutional context of the music program. Drawing on this legitimacy, Ali uses the musical practice to connect himself to different cultural entities and incorporate disparate elements into his sense of self, thereby expanding the discursive field through which his social existence becomes meaningful. When performed inside the institutional frame of cultural exchange, Western music unambiguously points to socially accepted notions of intercultural friendship and recognition. However, by reiterating these cultural expressions in slightly different contexts (e.g., on social-media platforms), Ali operates on the border of cultural intelligibility.¹⁰ While his musical performances can be recognized in one way as “proper” expressions of Palestinian resistance, because they draw upon the legitimacy of the cultural-exchange program (and the implied meaning of recognition and equality of these activities), at the same time, they embody an element that renders them outside authorized forms of Palestinian resistance. This element, I suggest, is connected to the new generations’ need to articulate resistance and identity in a form that acknowledges the experiences of young refugees growing up in Lebanon, who do not simply inherit a natural longing for Palestine, but are bound to construct their own ideas of belonging. Rather than detaching himself from established notions of resistance and national identity, Ali’s musical performances can be seen as attempts to fuse an unceasing attachment to primordial Palestine with a developing cosmopolitanism among younger generations of Palestinian refugees, thereby expressing a longing for a livable future rather than a dignified, yet already lived, past. Thus, for participants like Ali, musical performance might be a context in which the social imperative of remembering Palestine can be combined meaningfully with forms of belonging that transcend the national as the sole locus of hope and aspiration.

Concluding discussion

As an important site for national identification, the music program subjects its participants to a specific form of belonging. However, this subjection produces a range of opportunities for agency for the participants to take up and use. Some of these are aligned with dominant ideas of resistance in the social field. The music program offers important possibilities for resignifying Palestinian identity through musical performance and rendering it in terms of “humanness,” as opposed to often-found linkages between Palestinians and terrorism, criminality, and other degrading terms. In this way, Palestinian identity becomes livable; in

¹⁰ That Ali is met in his surroundings with a normative demand that he should just play Arabic or Eastern music tells us that these acts do not pass unnoticed.

musical performance, “Palestinianness” can be inhabited and experienced as empowering and pointing toward a future life of dignity and freedom. Musical performance may also cross social discourses in ways that seemingly involve more tension. Performing music may be at odds with social norms concerning respectable femininity. However, by drawing on the legitimacy of the nationalist narrative and authorizing institutional frameworks, young women have found ways to engage in music while remaining within the confines of socially accepted conduct. Finally, music performance may also contribute to an expansion of discourse. When participants use their musical abilities to employ a foreign set of cultural expressions and perform a more personal or generation-specific sense of belonging, they subtly challenge the boundaries of discourse, extending the limits of how resistance and belonging can be expressed and experienced.

Common for these various instances of agency is that they are connected to, and even enabled by, fundamental discourses concerning national belonging and resistance that underlie the musical practice. Musical performance entails a form of docile agency (Mahmood, 2001); by picking up and appropriating the discursive elements linked to Palestinian nationalism and identity for various purposes, the participants simultaneously constitute themselves as proper national subjects. Participating in the music program does not entail a possibility for radical self-creation beyond these social norms. However, it allows participants to inhabit the norms in ways that do not just reinscribe them—although I maintain that this is also a central part of the music program’s social effect. Participants also can experience their subjectivities differently, exceed certain social expectations, and expand the categories through which existence becomes meaningful.

In a recent text (Boeskov, 2018), I argue that this transformative potential is connected to music as a form of cultural expression that mediates the social on multiple levels.¹¹ While the musical performances in Rashidieh are vital for articulating a sense of national belonging and appropriated for specific social and institutional aims, their meaning cannot be contained within these frames. Rather, the performances mediate a range of other subjectivities and socialities, including social-identity formations of gender and generation, as well as belonging to imagined communities and affiliations with people and places outside the immediate context. The musical performance opens up a space for experiencing and moving through these simultaneous forms of sociality. In this process, participants draw upon the legitimacy and authority of one way of being, in order to make possible other forms as well. In musical performances at commemorative events, Lebanese festivals, or as part of Palestinian/Norwegian cultural-exchange activities, participants invoke the authority of these contexts to constitute themselves as capable human beings with a legitimate cultural identity. In these musical performances, Hanin and Daleen momentarily perform their gender on the border of established norms of decency, and thereby embody a

11 Here I draw upon the conception of “Music and the Social” developed by Georgina Born (2012).

potential for a different set of norms pertaining to young Palestinian women. Performing Western music on his saxophone, Ali articulates a sense of belonging that incorporates the vision of a different future for the new generation of refugees into the established norms of attachment to the homeland.

While these modes of agency are not necessarily subversive, in that they displace social norms, they do have effects that, over time, may accumulate to produce social change. Discourses are neither uniform nor stable. Rather, as Foucault (1978) writes, the world of discourse consists of “a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies,” (100) even for opposing and contrasting objectives. This insight also underpins Butler’s vision of a performative politics (Butler, 1997a). While the individual depends on the world of discourse to become intelligible as a subject, the discursive field is not decided once and for all. The agency expressed by the young participants from the music program in Rashidieh suggests that musical performance may offer opportunities for experimentation and innovation within a social field overdetermined by powerful relations of domination and equally cemented notions of resistance. Within these constraints, participants make use of their musical abilities to perform allegiance to established cultural truths, but also to formulate alternative visions of possible futures.

About the author

Kim Boeskov is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer in music education at Aarhus University and the Rhythmic Music Conservatory, Copenhagen, Denmark. In 2019, he defended his Ph.D. thesis entitled *Music and social transformation. Exploring ambiguous musical practice in a Palestinian refugee camp* at the Norwegian Academy of Music.

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