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More-than-human Assemblages and the Politics of (Food) Conviviality: Cooking, Eating, and Living Together in Germany

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Abstract
This article follows the activities of two initiatives seeking to improve living conditions of migrants in Germany. In their attempts to foster collective livability, both rely on ingenious assemblages of food, people, material objects, and their individual and collective affordances. Central in these assemblages are technological solutions the initiatives have devised to overcome the obstacles newcomers face: One uses food bikes that bypass social, physical, and bureaucratic hurdles, whereas the other employs a shipping container with a built-in kitchen that travels across Germany, leaving behind communities that cook together. We explore how material agencies operate and matter in the pursuance of convivial contexts that favor social inclusion, the latter seen as an ongoing socio-material accomplishment constituted as human and nonhuman actors interact in the world.

Keywords
conviviality, foodscapes, material agency, migration, more-than-human assemblages

Introduction

Even though the bicycle trailer is heavy and bulky, it moves at a considerable speed. Expertly, the cyclist weaves the vehicle through Berlin’s back alleys and walkways, over parking lots, through narrow passages, parks, and into the city (IMAGE 1). It is a hot summer day and there are people everywhere. As we cycle past them, many turn their heads to trace the movement of the brightly colored bike trailer, reading the bold letters on its side that spell out “REFUEAT.” We follow the food bike as it guides us towards the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin’s city center, where the cyclist and his colleague, both of them Syrian refugees, will convert the trailer into a food stall selling Arabic street food to the attendants of the Christopher Street Day parade. At our destination, we get to witness the astonishing transformation as the REFUEAT team produces a large number of objects from the trailer: three folding tables, a deep-frying pan and portable stove, water canisters and cleaning materials, a tent serving as the stall’s roof, mountains of prepared ingredients, and much more. The bike trailer serves as the front of the stall, while also doubling as the kitchen surface. Within less than half an hour, the vehicle has been entirely transformed into a fully functioning kitchen stall (IMAGE 2).
REFUEAT is a small business that initially employed refugees who had arrived in Berlin between 2015 and 2016. It is one of the many local initiatives that have arisen across Europe that use food to support the living conditions of refugees and asylum seekers after the migration events of 2015. These projects range from small businesses, cooking workshops, community gardens, and food
aid to refugee and ethnic food festivals (Food Relations 2018). The versatility of food and the diversity of its applications, be they non-commercial, job-related, or entrepreneurial, is what relates food to conceptions of social integration. “Food is one of the most used common denominators and an equalizer between newcomers and long-settled residents: recipes travel easily across borders and language barriers, and make immigrants’ skills and contributions visible to the general public”, reads the European Commission’s website on integration.¹ A large proportion of migrants in Germany currently work in the gastronomic sector, with roughly a third of the German hotel and restaurant industry being staffed by foreign nationals (Sanderson 2020). Food production, cooking, retail, catering, education, and shared commensality thus have the potential to support the present and future livelihoods of migrants in host societies. Yet, the power of food for community cohesion and positive intercultural relations invoked by initiatives is often based on assumptions and, sometimes, idealistic viewpoints that downplay the discrimination and othering that can occur through food (Wise 2011). Still, as integration into a new society is an enormous challenge that necessitates a diversity of obstacles to be overcome, local citizens have pushed their creativity, engagement and optimism to further enable newcomers’ active participation in the marketplace and in the public sphere.

Both necessary sustenance and a communicative system, food reminds us of who we are and who we can be – and where, and with whom – as we engage with its many “affordances” or “possibilities for action” (Gibson 1979; Faraj and Azad 2013). The possibilities of food that allow it to be perceived, imagined, manipulated, consumed, moved, and stored shape the initiatives outlined in this paper and the objects and materials they involve – each of them with their own affordances. Together with the case of REFUEAT, we consider the work of Über den Tellerrand, an association whose focus is to build community among people of different cultural backgrounds through food. Über den Tellerrand translates as “[to look] over the edge of your plate”, a German expression for open-mindedness, which reflects the association’s interest in what critical engagement with food can do for citizens. With its sister organization, Kitchen on the Run, they use a shipping container with a built-in kitchen to travel through Europe and organize community cooking events along the way. REFUEAT and Über den Tellerrand aim to find political, social and economic means to contribute to social inclusion by introducing what Peter Nyers and Kim Rygiel (2012, 9) describe as a “different normative vision of the future, in which notions of belonging and entitlement to rights are founded on criteria of residence, participation in community, and social relations developed in space and in relation to the ‘commons’”. To fulfil that purpose, both organizations rely on ingenious assemblages of food, people, and matter. Assemblages are articulations of heterogeneous elements which only function in symbiosis; they are “living, vibrant confederations with the power to enact certain realities” (Espírito Santo and Hunter 2021, 13). The elements that constitute assemblages are “actants” in the sense of Bruno Latour (2005). We recognize actants’ agentic capacity to generate effects and outcomes that alter societal functioning, while understanding that agency is confederate and distributed among the assembled entities given that “elements by themselves probably never cause anything” (Bennett 2010, 33).

Acknowledging shared agency across living and non-living matter stems from seeing the world as multiple and performative, shaped through practices and interaction, and viewing agency as a fundamentally mediated accomplishment, brought about through the forging of associations or alliances between different entities (Law and Mol 1995; Barad 2003; Müller 2015).
Comprehending the world as performative means that it can be shaped by everyone and everything that has ever existed and exists now – be they food, people on the move, or items on wheels. Central to our goal is to understand how, in this concrete situation in which political institutions and ideological apparatuses constrain the world-making capacity of refugees and migrants by turning them into a bureaucratic issue, food and artefacts come together, add complexity and generate possibilities to forge new life, new communities, and new ways of being in the world.

We use the notion of “conviviality” to address these forms of diverse sociality. The term conviviality finds roots in two Latin words, *convivium* and *cumvivere*. *Convivium* means a banquet, a feast or a shared meal. *Cumvivere* means “to live with”.

Conviviality is generally associated with “euphoric ideals” (Phull and al. 2015, 978) of sociability, friendliness and enjoyment spent around the table, over a long meal. It refers to a playful but planned association between individuals contributing to create a pleasant atmosphere. Yet, conviviality is too often confused with commensality, which is broadly defined as the practice of eating together (Sobal 2000) or eating at the same table (Fischler 2011). The terms are used interchangeably as they prompt positive associations of shared meals and togetherness in people’s minds. In the social sciences of food, though, conviviality always carries implicit notions of pleasure while commensality does not, as its social functions may also encompass segregation and social division (Grignon 2001; Fischler 2011; Phull and al. 2015; Jönsson et al. 2021). Conviviality addresses less the act of eating together along with its sensorial and social implications, than the collective aspiration for affability and jovialness around the table, which is typically orchestrated by a host. Conviviality can therefore be seen as an intervention in the politics of commensality.

In the context of academic studies from various scholarly disciplines, the concept’s second root has become prominent, as conviviality has become widely conceptualized as the capacity of living together. It addresses the challenges of intercultural relations in the globalized world and the consequences this has for everyday living with difference (Wise and Noble 2016; Nowicka and Vertovec 2014). Both in academia and activism, the term has also been used as an alternative to a Derridean notion of conditional hospitality, which keeps power inequalities between migrants and hosts in place (Wise 2011, 102).

By our usage conviviality is, similarly, not dependent on or facilitated by, unilateral generosity. Conviviality, as we understand it here, refers to endeavors rooted in an ethics of communality and reciprocity which acknowledge and address power asymmetries, social inequalities and other forms of difference throughout their path towards togetherness. In this paper we extend that ethics beyond the human realm, and expand Ivan Illich’s (1973, 11) seminal definition of conviviality as the “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons and the intercourse of persons with their environment”² by adding nonhuman entities to the equation. In this particular scenario, we see people, food and mobile kitchens as intrinsically interwoven in interdependent networks and relations, and guided by complex motivations (Vetter 2018; Caillé 2000). Conviviality therefore provides a lead for examining the interplay of more-than-human relationships, and how the different players, human and nonhuman, deploy agency together to imagine, shape, resist and counter narratives through their relationships and entanglements within foodscapes (more on this below). This emphasis on interdependence and intensive relationality, with all its changing and struggling connections, tensions, conflicts, and negotiations should be seen as political practice.
since it carries profound social and ecological implications (Given 2013; 2018; Manzi 2020). The conveyances devised by REFUEAT and Über den Tellerrand allow us to witness how they strive to assemble food, matter, and humans to formulate responses to the unequal relations that affect the lives of refugees and migrants. Informed by the multispecies and New Materialist turns (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) and some of their applications in food studies (Abbots 2016), this paper also benefits from the insights of critical social movement studies, in particular those pertaining to the consequences for democratic empowerment and the exercise of citizenship that derive from “playing with” technology (Milan 2016). We interrogate the political dimensions of REFUEAT and Über den Tellerrand and the new attempts of “living together” that the engagement with food and their mobile kitchens provoke. Centrally, we explore the extent to which things other-than-human have an impact on migrant-local interactions in the public space and may be thought of as agentic objects that make things happen.

The fieldwork of this study was conducted between 2019 and 2022. We carried out semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with the owners of REFUEAT and with representatives of Über den Tellerrand upon several occasions. We asked about the history of the initiatives, their organization, the challenges they have encountered and their expectations. We also accompanied the REFUEAT staff to an event they catered in Berlin, and conducted participant observation in cooking events and planning meetings organized by Über den Tellerrand in the city of Rendsburg.

**Pedaling Food Bikes**

REFUEAT is a food business operating in Berlin since 2016. It was formed by Aymann, a second-generation German-Syrian designer, and Constantin, a retired German business consultant. In reaction to the lack of infrastructure to support the newcomers who arrived in Berlin during the long summer of migration, they wanted to create low-threshold employment opportunities for recent arrivals. Hence, they founded a business using customized kitchen bicycles to sell Syrian food all over the city, employing predominately male Syrian refugees.

In 2019, REFUEAT additionally opened an eatery, and more recently, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, developed a home delivery service. The dishes on their menu are common Middle Eastern street food, such as falafel and haloumi sandwiches, though much attention is given to details taken from traditional Syrian family recipes, for instance adding pomegranate and lemon to their falafel sandwiches. Using bike trailers, REFUEAT sets up portable miniature kitchens at public events and private occasions. The bicycle trailers contain gas or induction cookers, equipped with everything needed to prepare fresh food outdoors – from pans and deep fryers to washing bowls and a portable pavilion. As shown below, these “food bikes” play essential roles in the world-making projects that happen through REFUEAT.

For migrants and refugees newly arriving in Germany, building a life is hard to say the least – especially if their countries of origin lie, like Syria, in the Middle East. Even after receiving refugee status in Germany, numerous hurdles exist that make it difficult for migrants to find employment (Koca 2019). On an institutional level, these include, for instance, the lack of recognition of professional certificates and drivers’ licenses. Adding to this, deficient German language skills make it difficult for many to enter low-threshold jobs, and many migrants struggle to find employment. Well aware of these issues, Aymann and Constantin wanted to start a business that
would bypass these obstacles and allow migrants to reach economic stability through their work, while simultaneously having the opportunity to improve their German skills and become part of the local community. Together, they developed the idea of building bicycle trailers that could move freely through the city and set up food stalls in different locations, requiring minimal investment and bureaucratic work. Riding bicycles is ecologically sustainable and does not require any form of license in Germany, and selling street food does not demand advanced German language proficiency. The food bikes allow REFUEAT to circumvent many of the institutional obstacles posed to refugee workers. In that sense, they contain emancipatory and convivial qualities similar to those identified in research on bicycle-based activism (Furness 2015) and on the rise of the e-bike in urban space (Rérat 2021). By offering a (more or less) inexpensive alternative to modes of movements such as the private car, bicycles bring a drastic improvement in mobility to previously restricted communities.

Aided by a small electric motor that carries the weight of the heavy trailer, the REFUEAT staff gain access to most of Berlin. The original bike trailers were developed by a small German business, with additional structures and customizations designed and built by Constantin and Aymann. Based on these first prototypes, a wood workshop in Berlin later developed further models, each better tailored to the needs of the cyclists. This was a lengthy process because, although food bikes have been used by others in Germany before, they are relatively rare. Each enterprise, in addition, has food-specific requirements for the bicycles, such as space for a deep-frying pan in REFUEAT’s case, which makes the food bikes non-scalable (IMAGE 3). Similarly, local legal conditions, including for instance the obligation to erect a shelter on site in Berlin, makes it necessary to customize the bicycles so that they can transport a tent amongst other things. Aymann, himself a designer who believes in the importance of aesthetics, furthermore commissioned a well-known tape-artist to decorate the trailers. Inspired by street art styles, the striking, colorful patterns were designed specifically to attract the gaze of locals and meet the aesthetic ideals of a cosmopolitan clientele. As a social initiative, REFUEAT also attracted the attention of mainstream media and of state and civil society bodies such as the Commission for Integration and Migration of the Senate of Berlin and the Expert Council on Integration and Migration, which endorsed the food bike catering activity, recognizing that language courses are not the sole path to achieve social integration but rather that employment and participation in everyday life are also very important for this process.4
REFUEAT’s mobile menu is strongly shaped by the materiality of the food bikes. Without extensive cooling facilities, they had to scrap their iconic “Arabic hotdogs” and other meats from their mobile carte (though meats continue to be available at their eatery), instead focusing on vegetarian and vegan dishes like falafel and haloumi sandwiches. Despite (or perhaps, because of) these restrictions, REFUEAT has been able to create new and unique food networks through their recruitment of international ingredients and utensils. We have been for instance told about their tahini, which travels from Sudan to Lebanon before arriving in their Berlin kitchen; their dish packing boxes, made of palm leaf, compostable and fairly produced in India; or the hand-dried okra, which was brought back from Lebanon by a friend on holiday, who acquired it at a small local business. These materials become meaningful in that they put the far-away, for some even unreachable, on the geographical and social map of Berlin. “[The okra] is really dried in our sun,” Aymann told us one day. REFUEAT thereby marks not only locations where one can consume Syrian dishes prepared by Arabic migrants but where one can participate in a whole international network of food links and processes – and where one can also taste a little bit of Arabic sunshine. By moving the brightly colored food bikes through the city, the refugees working for REFUEAT are able to claim space and visibility outside of the usual service transactions. Utilizing movement in this way is a powerful tactic, if we think of movement as constituting the processes through which social relations are made (or unmade), maintained and performed (Urry 2009). At the core of movement is the human body, which “is not a stationary object but a lived sensuous subject in motion” (Christensen and Mikkelsen 2013, 198) and, through motion, it creates places of meaning and opportunity, producing senses of belonging (or not belonging) to a group, home, or community. The movement of food, ingredients, and recipes reflects the movement of the people involved with it. In this sense, the movement of refugees and food bikes through the city is not merely an economic strategy, but also a political comment: One of REFUEAT’s slogans, “Streetfood aus der Heimat” (Streetfood from the homeland), reimagines public space by questioning what home means, who the streets are for, and how they can be experienced or practiced. By enabling this movement, the bikes work as actants “with trajectories, propensities,
or tendencies of their own” (Bennett 2010, viii), apt to “make a difference, produce effects and affects, [and] alter the course of events by their action” (Coole 2013, 459). The food bikes challenge the structures that organize and regulate the public space formally, which make business ownership and employment difficult for migrants. At the same time, through the catering activity, the workers also learn how to navigate and inhabit the private and public space within their new home, and to interact with locals. Sometimes this happens in ways that are not available for most migrants fleeing war and oppression such as, for instance, being present in art and design exhibitions, festivals of different kind, and brand and pop-up happenings, events typical of a vibrant, cosmopolitan, and “creative” city like Berlin. Other times this happens in ways that might not be possible in their places of origin. At the end of July 2019, we accompanied the REFUEAT staff to sell food during the Christopher Street Day, the biggest LGBTQ+ community event in Berlin. The massive gathering was a good occasion to generate high income. It also provided a context that people coming from a country with legislation that criminalizes the LGBTQ+ community would have been less likely to experience in the public space of their hometowns. That day, we were able to observe a symbolic (dis)play aimed at representing social integration. Aymann bought one of the many rainbow flags available to purchase in the event, and hung it on the stall in a very visible place.

Exploring, experiencing and working in the city is not a unilaterally transformative process, as the movement and trajectories of the kitchen trailers also change and rearrange Berlin’s foodscapes. An addition to Appadurai’s multiple, fluid, and irregularly shaped “scapes” (1996), foodscapes are not only the physical and social landscapes of food consumption and production, but all the socially constructed places wherein food practices, values, meanings and representations intersect with the material and environmental realities that sustain people’s relationship with food (Dolphijn 2004; Goodman 2016; Johnston and Goodman 2015). Foodscapes are thus “deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors” (Appadurai 1996, 33). Through their mobile catering service, REFUEAT puts forward cosmopolitan foodscapes as a possibility for refugees to situate their lives in Berlin, “to convert the material world into a tangible dwelling” (Abarca 2020, xii) while simultaneously adding a constantly changing spatial element to these foodscapes. Within this particular entanglement of foodscapes, refugees, food, and technology, a convivial configuration emerges in which endeavors in politics (immigration), community (social integration) and livelihoods (securing basic needs) are co-fabricated by co-dependents with their own needs, motivations and limits, humans and nonhumans alike (Whatmore and Hinchcliff 2010). The mobile materiality of the bike and the object’s own affordances enable the exercise of citizenship, conceived as “a set of processual, performative and everyday relations between spaces, objects, citizens and non-citizens that ebbs and flows” (Spinney et al. 2015, 325). This way, the REFUEAT staff is given the opportunity not only to be integrated into the social fabric of Berlin but also to become part of its very making. The food bikes are somewhat close to what Andrea Vetter (2018) has termed convivial technologies which, through their characteristics of relatedness, accessibility, adaptability, bio-interaction, and appropriateness, promote more equality for people and less harm for the environment. In collaboration with humans and edible matter, the adaptable and non-polluting trailers assist refugees in gaining degrees of freedom and emancipation, provide them with a timesaver regarding the length of their stay in Germany, foster sociality and possibilities for more socially just living conditions.
By recognizing the vital role of nonhumans we do not mean adopting a framing in which shifts towards conviviality are accredited mainly to matter instead of the humans who are involved with it. Writing about the role of bicycles in early women’s liberation movements, Zack Furness (2005) alerts of the risk of overly ascribing female emancipation to the development of bicycles as a new technology. We concur with him on the necessity of situating discussions on the role of material agencies within their social and political contexts so “it is possible to emphasize the emancipatory qualities of convivial technologies without resorting to a grand myth of technological liberation” (2005, 410) just as much as we concur with the idea that “[m]atter never acts alone” (Abrahamsson et al. 2015, 5). Our focus on the recruitment of matter and technologies does not disregard the social, cultural and historical factors as well as the differential in power to enact action (Barad 2007) among the actants that shape and compose agentic assemblages. There are situations, indeed, in which the REFUEAT assemblage illustrates the latter by exposing some of its limits. Aymann told us one day that the lack of German language skills of some staff are often compensated by the charisma and attitude (big smiling) of the employees during the food service – “charisma is everything”, he said. However, language skills are sometimes crucial, as an episode on Christopher Street Day showed: Once the stall was installed in front of the Brandenburg Gate, and approximately one hour before the busiest time of the day, a food safety inspector began to scrutinize the area. The tension among the REFUEAT team was salient as they were operating within, but at the limits, set by the street food vending regulations (one must keep in mind that all the parts of the stall, the pits, and the food to be sold during a full-day event have to fit into the limited space provided by the bike trailer). The inspector conducted his work with zeal. Positioned outside the stall, we could see him looking through the display cases and the large coolers, pointing to specific spots around the pits, taking notes in reporting forms. All the while, he was engaging with Aymann in what it seemed to be an uncomfortable conversation during which, in many occasions, the former dominated while the latter acknowledged with head nods. After the inspection, Aymann approached us, relieved that all went well. He shared with us that the way he talked to and behaved before the inspector was decisive to avoid troubles. Being a German native speaker and mastering local codes allowed him to interact with the inspector in ways that produce an economic sociability that is just as essential as correct documentation to the success of the business endeavors. “Economic sociability encompasses both the flexibility enabled by social interaction, in contrast to the rigid contours of documented production, and the constraints that shape such interaction” (Cavanaugh 2016, 697). Aymann’s language and social skills allowed him to occupy the gaps and take advantage of the slippages across and between the social and the documentary.

REFUEAT’s participation in the Christopher Street Day celebration furthermore draws attention to disparities between the project’s convivial ambitions and the homogeneity of the social stratum the organization involves. At the time of our research, their staff consisted exclusively of men. In conversation, Aymann explained to us that he pays his staff well, notably above the minimum wage that workers in similar employment commonly receive because he wants them to be able to adhere to (what he considers to be) “traditional Muslim values” by supporting their families as sole breadwinners, should they choose to do so. At an event that celebrates diversity and demands equal access to social, political, and economic opportunities for all people on the broad spectrum of gender and sexuality, this patriarchal prioritization appears strikingly exclusive. REFUEAT does not give the opportunity to women to be income producers for their families, despite the fact that even for those who might prefer assuming more conservative or domestic roles, traditional
family structures have oftentimes been broken apart through war and relocation. While the small size of the business restricts the number of employees REFUEAT is able to engage, the lack of gender diversity amongst their staff projects a model of empowerment that gives preference to the social and economic pursuits of men, making apparent some boundaries social endeavors might impose.\textsuperscript{5} Despite this and other limitations, REFUEAT does succeed at rapidly constructing urgently needed niches for its employees within a capitalist system that is not intended to accommodate for the needs of people in precarious circumstances. The engagement of refugees with food and mobile technologies opens a pathway to claim space and social participation in the host society, while nurturing an alternative, convivial narrative in which horizontal living together prevails over assimilation. This favors a view of social inclusion – rather than of social integration – as an ongoing socio-material accomplishment constituted and reconstituted as (human and nonhuman) actors engage in the world.

Thinking Outside (and Cooking Inside) the Box

Über den Tellerrand is a non-governmental association established in 2014 in Berlin, which has more recently developed branches across Germany and internationally. Its aim is to create opportunities for people of different cultures, be they locals or migrants, to meet and get to know each other based on a principle of equality (https://ueberdentellerrand.org/start-englisch/). Food played a prominent role for the organization’s inception and development. It all started in 2013 when four Berlin-based students approached a refugee protest camp in Oranienplatz to support refugees’ claim for rights and establish neighborly relationships with them through cooking and sharing meals. Understanding food as a powerful actant, the students continued and expanded the initiative under the legal status of an association, with food-related activities such as cooking classes, community cooking events, and urban gardening at its center. The design of events conforms to what has been described as two conditions facilitating convivial encounters: “built-in boundaries” and “shared purposes” (Bredewold et al. 2020, 2057). The spaces defined by food and culinary practices (the kitchen, the dining room or the urban garden), the clear purposes of the events and, as shown below, the predefined roles assigned to participants serve as means to deal with the fragility, precariousness and indeterminacy of encounters with difference. The association’s undertakings result in encounters that are noncommittal: there is no pressure for the development of a deep, emotional connection but, instead, the togetherness experienced in convivial encounters is sufficient as an end in itself.

Über den Tellerrand’s cooking events allow participants to meet in a context that spotlights migrants’ expertise and competences by platforming them as teachers. Migrants instruct attendants in cooking a recipe they themselves have decided upon. This enables a shift in narrative, moving away from the notion of locals and migrants as hosts and hosted, and instead directing attention to the ways in which conviviality may reshape communities by promoting encounters and interactions in the absence of mutual stereotyping (Adloff 2020). “The idea is to break down a bit the label and not be either a refugee or a non-refugee,” explained Marieke Schöning from the Berlin headquarters (interview 27 July 2019). This way, migrants are able to leave their precarious, societally ascribed roles of guests at the mercy of the state’s generosity. The framework of the cooking events recognizes the knowledges and skills of migrants as valuable and meaningful, and
attendants are asked to witness them and learn from them. This disposition disrupts the power differentials of the typical guest-host relation: by bringing their own recipes and foods to the table, the “guests” themselves become “hosts” (Wise 2011, 102) and are offered a role of authority. Attendees are thereby urged to see migrants as equals rather than as an inadequate Other required to relearn everything in the hope of integrating through assimilating.

This backdrop that favors diversity and equality is key for understanding Über den Tellerrand’s actions not only as convivial and politically motivated, but also as an example of “radical cosmopolitanism” as it emphasizes “the desire to live and engage with others but also to be transformed by those considered as potentially different and as outsiders” (Baban and Rygiel 2017, 101). Radical cosmopolitanism underlies the actions of socially engaged or “progressive” grassroots associations aiming to bring people together through exchange. Exchanging implies not giving up hosts and newcomers’ own cultural particularities but the deliberate and organized effort to engage with these particularities. That is clear in Über den Tellerrand’s culinary events as they push forward a “poetics of relation” (Glissant 1997 in Gutierrez-Rodriguez 2015, 85) based on creative and affective crossings, and resist hierarchies of host and hosted by sweeping away the migrant-local binary.

Kitchen on the Run is the portable version of the project, which develops within and around a shipping container with a built-in kitchen. Although their primary purpose serves the transportation of goods, containers have become increasingly popular as portable infrastructures in the 21st century, serving for instance as temporary offices, accommodation, or classrooms. Their increased extra-industrial usage is what first raised the interest of Rabea Haß, Jule Schröder, and Andreas Reinhard, the creative team behind Kitchen on the Run during their planning phase. Inspired by shipping container architecture and design, the team had wanted to create a project around a travelling container long before they had the idea to use it as a tool to advocate for the rights of migrants. Their focus on migration activism through food emerged out of the context of the 2015 migration events in Europe, from which the idea of the kitchen container as a place of encounter developed organically: “We were thinking we always invite friends to our kitchen, and it’s really easy to get to know people while cooking together and sharing food” (Schröder, interview 20 April 2021). After successfully applying for funding and obtaining the donation of a container and kitchen utensils, the project became reality: “the fat blue one” (“der dicke Blaue”, in German), a large, blue container arrived in Germany from China and joined in as the “fourth team member”, in Jule’s words (ibid., interview). By recognizing the object as a teammate, the human members show their appreciation of the container’s value beyond its role in the pursuit of their project goal, acknowledging it as an opportunity to fundamentally shape the team’s affordances. In convivial endeavors “emphasis is on partnership rather than on mastery” (Given 2013, 6). The partnership included additional individuals, namely, a class of architecture students at the Technical University of Berlin, to whom the human team members handed the nonhuman member over with a minimal brief: to design and build a portable, practical, and aesthetic space to cook, eat, and socialize in (IMAGE 5). Over a few months, the students developed a collaborative design resulting in a fully equipped kitchen with a dismountable wooden terrace and wooden folding furniture. Brainstorming sessions included cooking at Über den Tellerrand’s kitchen in Berlin, with the aim of identifying any potential unease people might feel when cooking in an unfamiliar kitchen, such as opening cupboards outside of their own homes. To that effect, the designers developed an open shelve system that allows one to easily see the contents of each storage unit without having to
search around and open cupboard doors (IMAGE 4). The shelves were furthermore tailored to fit particular objects that would be travelling in the container, making the tidying up at the end of events much quicker, and the transportation of utensils inside the container safer.

IMAGE 4: The kitchen space inside the container is designed to be welcoming and easy to navigate. © Photograph: The authors

In 2016, Kitchen on the Run travelled through Europe, visiting the cities of Bari in Italy, Marseille in France, Duisburg in Germany, Deventer in the Netherlands, and Gothenburg in Sweden. On its journeys, the container became a point of convergence for different movements of people, foods and ideas, and facilitated the crossing of paths. Built for travel, shipping containers represent the quality of mobility, while simultaneously referring to the globalized economy. Despite being comparably simple in design in contrast to other travelling objects – a container has no engine, no wheels, no sails – profound changes in trade patterns and in the geographical location of economic centers over the last century indicate a strong connection between the emergence of the container and global trade (Levinson 2016). The itinerant kitchen container, too, is highly symbolic, as it underlines the strong contrast between refugees’ immobilities and the expansive geographies of global supply chains. The international journey followed a route from Southern to Northern Europe with the specific purpose of tracing one of the most used routes by fleeing people and the European countries that, at the time, received the largest number of migrants. The route was intended to raise
the question that “if goods can cross borders, then why should people not” (Schöning, interview 27 July 2019). During the European tour, the team stayed in each location for four weeks and organized community-cooking events that are similar, both in objectives and approach, to those held in Berlin and by satellite organizations: the container was the site of regular, free cooking events at which migrants taught the other participants a recipe from their country of origin. The tour was the first opportunity for some refugees to prepare “their” foods in several months, since not all refugee camps or shelters provide the possibility of cooking. The organizing team even encouraged the refugees to cook complicated and time-consuming recipes so as to keep participants busy and happily engaged in all culinary activities, from the *mise en place* to eating to dishwashing and cleaning.6

Since 2017, the team has been touring in four German locations each year (with exception of 2020 and 2021), most often in small towns and cities, because of their more limited exposure to cultural diversity and because the participants were more likely to meet again. Their main goal in Germany is to create encounters between locals and people with migrant background, and to foster community building. Hopes are put on the object’s mobility to leave “traces and palpable reverberations in its passage through various interactions-in-the-making” (Chu 2010, 14). In the best-case scenario, the container leaves behind a “cooking community” that continues to gather and that might even start a new satellite of the Berlin-based association. The Kitchen on the Run team pursues this goal through “planning meetings” in which the staff and potential volunteers discuss, express ideas and are encouraged to become active members of an inclusive community through cooking. We attended a planning meeting in Rendsburg, a small city of 30,000 inhabitants in northern Germany. At that occasion, participants received a booklet titled “Cook, eat, meet, repeat”, which is part of the Über den Tellerrand’s “toolbox”. The booklet contains guidelines, concepts, and best practice templates to help volunteers set up and run cooking events and build community ties after the departure of the container. Kitchen on the Run can be therefore considered as a convivial tool in the sense characterized by Illich, which is not restricted to objects and technologies in a narrow sense but refers to rationally designed institutions of every kind that “give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision” (Illich 1973, 21). Besides migrants and refugees, the cooking events are typically attended by locals from “the classical engaged social strata”; that is, people invested in community activism, aware of issues surrounding migrants’ livelihoods in Germany, and oftentimes more educated (Schöning, interview 27 July 2019). Many of the locals participating in the gatherings of September 2022 in Rendsburg were middle-aged female individuals who occupy civil servant positions, for instance at town level and even in the Army, or in associations supporting community engagement. The migrants were in their majority male refugees from Middle Eastern countries in their early thirties. This characteristic of the event’s demographics stresses the political dimension within these actions, while reminding us that not everyone has the same opportunities to move, interact and construct a context for being with, caring for, and receiving care from others.
On its first tour, the container traced the route many people on the move take through Europe. © Photograph: The authors

Even though many attendees are familiar with the reasons that motivate the container’s travels, its integration into public foodscapes enables its affordances to far exceed this group of people. Public foodscapes foster encounters that do not require intentionality; smells and other sensory traces of food have the power to spontaneously draw people into places and relations they did not intend to seek out (Wise 2011). The design and aesthetic of the container, which merge elements of private and public foodscapes by bringing a representation of the domestic sphere (a homely kitchen space and dining table) into a public place, enhances its power to capture the attention of passers-by, and to recruit them into the project. We could witness this in Rendsburg when some adults, young students and families approached the container out of curiosity and ended up participating. The cooking events, in addition, allow foods and food practices to transition from the public realm into the private, as previously alien or unfamiliar dishes and ingredients become familiar.

In the container, the culinary work is shared among the participants who wash, chop and prepare the ingredients, and the volunteers who cook them. The dishes we made in Rendsburg included vegetarian versions of Indian tomato-curry, mujaddara – a Middle-Eastern family dish comprising lentils, rice, and caramelized onions, often prepared on weekends, shishbarak – a dish served on holidays which consists of hand-made, filled dough pockets that are slow-cooked in yoghurt, and dolma – filled vegetables we hollowed out using specialized utensils. The recipes are constrained
by the availability of ingredients in local food outlets, by dietary restrictions relating to taste preferences of the locals – such as the decision to maintain a low level of spiciness –, and by the cultural and ethical attachments of migrants and locals which, although different, overlap in the context of the event. We see this, for instance, in the nonuse of meats to accommodate to Muslim, Hindu, and vegetarian prescriptions altogether. The cooking evenings follow a clear structure: the events begin with a welcome round and ice-breaker games that encourage unfamiliar attendees to converse amongst one another. The cooks who have volunteered to guide the recipes briefly introduce themselves and their dishes. The schedule for the evening is presented: cooking, eating together, and then a “dishwashing party.”

During the meal preparation, the container bustles with activity: vegetables, fruits, grains, fire, water, utensils, technologies, and humans all work together. These are “not merely individual agencies of human and material, but the two working together in collaboration” (Given 2013, 13) to create a sense of community generated by bodily and material movement. Conversations hum throughout the space while attendants get to know each other, sharing stories, passing on instructions, and comparing cooking techniques. Music plays in the background, and the space quickly fills with delicious scents. The container and surrounding areas are divided into several cooking stations, each focused on a particular dish, among which participants wander freely. As ingredients move from cutting boards to frying pans and large, steaming pots, the attendees begin to run out of tasks. Conversations deepen and move away from the topic of food, and hungry anticipation builds. As the cooking activities begin to wrap up, the preparation stations are quickly converted into a long dining table, plates are set, candles lit, and glasses filled with water. Once everyone has taken a place at the table, the meal is opened with a verse of a German nursery rhyme, then food is served onto plates and passed around the table. Quiet settles in as participants savor the results of their collective work, only interrupted by compliments and expressions of appreciation. After everyone has eaten their fill – and there is always more than enough to go around – the music is turned up, used dishes are collected and the cleaning commences. After the work is done, a closing round gives space for everyone to share final remarks on their experience and, in a ritualistic manner, everyone thanks the other attendees, and occasionally also the container.

Through its role as a team member and through its aesthetic and practical affordances, the kitchen container is fully invested with convivial agency. It therefore becomes an actant that asks to be experienced as a place of encounter, and where conviviality may be witnessed through an intentional or orchestrated commensality which disrupts the hierarchies and social regulations that might exist around the table. We may thus think of the container as a “happy object”; an object that affects us “in the best way” and gains in value the more it is oriented toward positive and pleasurable feelings (Ahmed 2010, 22-26). This orientation is what the association seeks through its events, aiming to provide a “shared horizon of experience” (2010, 21) and to shape affects. Through its movement, the container passes through communities, encodes biographies, memories and identities, cumulates positive affective value, and becomes entangled with change (Given 2013). This positive affect does not exist in isolation but emerges through interaction and collaboration between human and nonhuman agents (Kipnis 2015). This is not to say that the results of collaboration are always positive; interactions can be dissonant, discordant or disruptive. Although the funding team of Kitchen on the Run told us they did not witness any hostility on their initial tour, we experienced several occasions of tacit tension during the cooking events, ranging from disagreements on how to clean dishes (the water not being warm enough, wooden boards not
being cleaned with water or German women and men spending more time on the cleaning tasks), to the discomfort some young women expressed about the heavy attention some of the male participants put on them. Even though we did not witness open conflict, there were emotionally and socially demanding experiences that raised unanswered questions on their impact on the project’s realization.

In addition to its function as a travelling kitchen, “the fat blue one” has fulfilled other purposes more recently. During the summer of 2020, it was featured as part of an architecture and design exhibition at Munich’s museum for modern art, the “Pinakothek der Moderne.” Although the intention had been to host cooking sessions at this location too, the Covid-19 pandemic complicated plans for live events. The container, however, remained at the museum and could be visited under measured restrictions. Its placement at one of the world’s largest museums for modern art offers a perspective that sees the container itself as a work of art. In a way, this closes the circle to the origin of the project: Since its beginning, the container has been an inspiring object whose affordances not only include the practical purpose of transport but simultaneously have creatively stimulating affects. Like a canvas, it has absorbed layers upon layers of stories and meanings on its travels. Alluding to the ways in which people are denied rights and opportunities, the container stimulates the beholders’ creative perception, inspiring them to “imagine a world with room for everyone and everything” (Ingold 2020, 604). The container being featured in an exhibition at the Pinakothek der Moderne highlights its ability to – both physically and affectively – move and to be moved.

More-than-Human Pathways toward Convivial Futures

This article has explored processes and collaborations between human and nonhuman actors that have emerged in response to the challenges refugees and migrants face today in Germany and Europe. The activities of REFUEAT and Uber den Tellerrand/Kitchen on the Run toward newcomers rely heavily on the affordances of the material objects they work with. REFUEAT’s food bikes are precious tools for the migrant workers to navigate both the city and Germany’s bureaucratic system: they provide them with sustainable lives by facilitating mobility within the city, economic stability, and social connectivity. Through these dimensions they also increase the possibilities of agentive action of the workers who, through their movement, become able to participate in the performance of Berlin’s public space. Kitchen on the Run’s travelling container pursues a similar objective by offering a platform where people from different cultures can get together and migrants enact agency. The container is an essential team member on the cooking tour, serving at once as a transportation vessel, an infrastructure, and as a “happy object” that draws people in.

Both technologies possess a wide range of affordances that, through interaction, convert into convivial qualities that facilitate community building and encounters between migrants and locals. The objects’ mobility exceeds practical functions, serving as political commentary and tools for empowerment. REFUEAT and Kitchen on the Run play with elements of movement and mobility choosing frequently changing locations for their activities. Innovative designs are furthermore used by both initiatives to draw attention to their work and activism, amplifying their visibility by placing unusual objects into the public space. The combination of practical and aesthetic qualities
that make the objects both useful and socially affective is what makes the assemblages of humans, food, and technologies convivial and successful.

We appreciate that a focus on material agency does not necessarily offer full-scale solutions to the many challenges of inclusion and integration refugees and migrants face. Nonetheless, studying the agency of matter sheds light on the ways in which people from different communities are trying to collectively solve those issues by promoting conviviality through the medium of food. Our focus on the agentive capacities of food and material artefacts has shown that, far from being passive and lifeless things, they are essential parts of the assemblages that constitute such social responses. This is not to reduce the work of social activism to the matter that is bound up in it: While we find it crucial to emphasize material agencies, the activities and processes they afford are significant within socio-political frames that are independent from the objects themselves, which constitute only elements in the larger complex of networks, negotiations, trade-offs, and interactions that compose forms of living together. Thinking through the agencies of matter provides a window into how more-than-human assemblages are able to advocate collective livability, and into the limitations these endeavors entail. In the case of refugee livelihood in Germany, the two initiatives described here suggest that food and artifacts, and their materialities, can strongly influence the relations between migrants and locals by creating opportunities to circumvent the social, economic, and bureaucratic hurdles that are imposed on the former. REFUEAT and Über den Tellerand/Kitchen on the Run, by enabling collaboration between humans and matter, have constituted mobile nodes and practices within foodscape that encourage relational and affective experiences which, in turn, bring about new possibilities of being in the world.

Notes


2 Where intercourse means intensive and extensive interaction and engagement.

3 This paper deals with the activities of REFUEAT as carried until 2020. From then onwards the business activities and management have undergone changes that are independent from the context of the study.

4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0AFztHW4hY&t=61s; https://www.berlin.de/lb/intmig/integration-leben/helfende/artikel.596233.php?fbclid=IwAR2a_KtY3UkRXducDEzbz8wSbn-hZW3l3MFDDNl8AyYEm42RHDRnr_8niQ

5 During our research the owners of REFUEAT had been in conversation with a potential prospective female employee: the wife of their bread baker, who was not intended to cycle the food bikes but rather work in the eatery's kitchen. The topic was, however, a clear point of tension between them, making apparent their disparate views on gender roles and their visions for the definition of REFUEAT’s social outreach aims.

6 On the Kitchen on the Run European tour, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSk6S2pKz5E&t=6s (accessed on June 7, 2021)
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