

Migratory Choreography and Spaces of Resistance

Karen Vedel

As the current refugee disaster exploded, it became clear to me that *Republika* couldn't merely tell my own personal story, but had to embrace all others in the same situation—everyone fleeing from one life to another. Edhem Jesenković, Dansehallerne (2016)

The disastrous predicament of the many displaced persons fleeing war and terror in Syria in 2015 raised a heated debate in the Nordic countries around the acute need for humanitarian aid on the one hand and for raised security measures on the other. Hence, when the Swedish hosts of the 2016 Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) Semi-finals announced the intermission's stage performance with the following words: "Right now Europe is facing one of its most difficult challenges in a very long time,"¹ they did not refer to the counting of votes to determine the ten finalists. Rather, they referred to their introduction to *The Grey People* (2016), a choreographic entr'acte on the theme of what had become known as Europe's refugee crisis.

In the six-and-a-half-minute-long dance piece that followed, the nineteen dancers on stage moved through images all too familiar from photos accompanying the news coverage of the ongoing migration from Syria. In one scene, the choreographic formations resemble groups of refugees travelling on foot en route to an unknown future. In another, following a scene of dancers performing the undulating movements of a turbulent sea, a child is seen face down on the ground in a restaging of the iconic photo of the corpse of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi from Syria washed up on a beach in Turkey. Grey is the color of the costumes as well as the uniformly made-up faces of the dancers. As the choreography culminates, the ordeals of forced migration are alluded to in hectic dance moves before the dancers wash the grey off their faces in order to emerge as individuals, step off the stage and into the welcoming arms of the Stockholm audience.

While committed to bringing European broadcasting audiences together around light entertainment, ESC has, moreover, a history of being a stage on which the changing realities of Europe are played out (Fricker and Gluhovic 2013, 3). The programming of *The Grey People* in the semi-finals in Stockholm, where it was performed before a live audience of sixteen thousand and tele-broadcasted to millions, proves that 2016 was no exception. Before the show, several of those involved in the production commented on the decision to present a choreography on the politically charged theme of refugees. The Swedish choreographer Fredrik Benke Rydman provided a context for the humanitarian message by pointing to the historical background of ESC in the war-torn

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Europe of the mid-1950s.² The producer argued that *The Grey People* was a necessary reflection of the challenges facing Europe and the urgent need for hope and warmth in interpersonal relations.³ Last but not least, one of the hosts tied the relevance of the theme to his regret over the recent decision of the Swedish government in 2016 to tighten border controls and to deport eighty thousand asylum seekers.⁴

These comments position *The Grey People* as a dance piece created in response to the ongoing political discourse. Performed by a group of dancers proficient in the street dance style of Benke Rydman, the piece propounded a universalized migrant experience. With the exception of the child, the individual human being was portrayed as part of an anonymous mass until acknowledged by the community into which they had landed. In terms of dramaturgical structure, the choreography moved through the archetypal narratives of a *theater of migration*, described by theater scholar Emma Cox as “the separation, the journey, the encounter with others, the longing for home and sometimes the *nostos* (homecoming or return)” (2014, 9; italics and parenthesis in original). Only in the case at hand, the homecoming was represented in the affirmative event of being welcomed by fellow human beings in the new country of their arrival.

In the following, I turn to two choreographic examples that were similarly created in response to the crisis resulting from the tragedy in Syria. They differ, however, on several accounts. Not only were they either created or cocreated and performed by individuals who themselves have firsthand experience of forced migration on account of conflicts of war and/or persecution, they also challenge the narrative and visual tropes which characterize the choreography of *The Grey People*. The one, *Uropa – An Asylum Ballet* (2016) (henceforth *Uropa*), was a collaboration between CORPUS, the experimental section of The Royal Danish Ballet, and Sort/Hvid, a cutting edge theater company.⁵ The piece featured six professional dancers from the Royal Danish Ballet and six asylum seekers, all of whom were involved in the creative process. The other, the independently produced solo *Republika* (2016), was conceived, choreographed, and danced by Edhem Jesenković, whose family fled from the Third Balkan War in the early 1990s.⁶

The premieres of *Uropa* and *Republika* took place in Copenhagen in January 2016, within a week of the passing of legislation that epitomized a paradigmatic shift in Danish immigration policies, which had changed from being one of the most liberal in Europe in the early 1980s to being one of the most restrictive by the early 2010s. Among a series of restrictions, especially L87, a.k.a. The Jewelry Act, held strong symbolic value with the constituencies of the parties behind the agreement. This law granted the police the power to confiscate cash and valuables, including jewelry, above 10,000 DKK [1,350 €] from asylum seekers when entering Denmark. Perceived as symptomatic of an increasingly dehumanizing response to human tragedy, L87 was met with international criticism from Human Rights organizations, as well as protests in the streets of the larger cities in Denmark.⁷ In this political context, reading the dance performances as artistic interventions into the ongoing political debate was unavoidable.

Migration, Dance, and Migratory Choreography

Dance researchers have for more than a decade explored the relationship between dance, migration, and mobility. Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness, as the editors of *Migrations of Gesture* (2008), consider migration in literal terms as “the voluntary and involuntary historical displacements of human, gesturing populations” and figuratively as the migration or displacement of gestures from one medium or one discipline to another (xvi). In *Dance Research Journal*'s issue on Dance and Migration, published in 2008, choreography is proposed as a particularly ideal lens through which the experiences of im/migration may be critically appraised. Phrased in the succinct wording of Randy Martin in his article “Allegories of Passing in Bill T. Jones,” As a means for registering what movement can be, dance shows us how we pass from one state to another. It does this

literally, as bodies configure their time and space, and allegorically, as a touchstone to what it means to be passing through this world” (2008, 78).

These rather broad definitions of migration can be aligned with other terms having to do with border crossing such as “nomad,” “exile,” and “mobility,” the theorizing of which has been criticized by, among others, queer and critical race studies scholar Sara Ahmed (2000) for their use as metaphors for “the very process of dislocation” rather than dislocation from place. In the process of generalization, she maintains, “the historical determination of experiences of migration” is erased and “the migrant” becomes a figure (80–83). In a further elaboration of what she names “the turn to the stranger as a figure who should be welcomed” (4), Ahmed argues that to welcome the stranger is to welcome the already ontologized and thus differentiated figure of the unassimilable (150). Seen in this light, the choreographic representation of a universalized migrant experience in *The Grey People*, as well as its closing image, may be read as an affirmation of the hospitable intentions on behalf of the receiving nation toward “the ontologized alien.” Writing against “stranger fetishism,” Ahmed’s counter proposal is to unpack the different forms of displacement assembled in the figure of the stranger at a corporeal level by paying close attention to the discrete event, its processes of inclusion and exclusion, as well as relations of proximity and distance. For, as she argues, not only are migration stories “skin memory” (92), the processes involved in the experience of dislocation from place also imply embodied spatial reconfigurations (90).

Qualified in this manner, Ahmed’s critique of the metaphoric use of migration comes close to Martin’s theoretical explorations of the relationship between dance and migration, which suggests “a transposition of migration from theme to analytic operation” (2008, 74–87). As noted by Stacey Prickett, the focus of such an operation would be on “how the internal reality of the [choreographic] work is linked to its external reality without being reduced to a representative relationship” (2016, 54). Below, the choreographic treatments of migration on account of war and persecution in *Uropa* and *Republika* are linked not only to the political context of legislative changes in Danish immigration policies but also to the embodied experiences of the performers on stage. I will consider how the dance pieces strive—and partly succeed—to bypass the narrative tropes of a theater of migration, to deontologize the stranger, and momentarily also to go beyond representation in order “to reveal structures of power and the impact of sociopolitical circumstances” (Prickett 2016, 46).

Used in the title, the term *migratory choreography* indicates that I situate my analytical stance in an everyday marked by migration and the cultural transitions it entails, rather than in a supposedly consensual understanding of migration as a parenthesis in the history of an otherwise homogenous and unchanging culture. The term is indebted to the notion of *migratory aesthetics*, coined by cultural theorist Mieke Bal (2007), whose definition foregrounds that “migrants (as subjects) and migration (as an act to perform as well as a state to be or live in) are part of any society today, and that their presence is an incontestable source of cultural transformation” (23; parenthesis in original). In line with this understanding, my reading of the closing scene in *The Grey People* is skeptical of the implied proposal that the process by which the individual asylum seeker steps out of the anonymous mass of migrants and enters a ready-made society as a political subject, is frictionless. More realistically, new challenges will manifest as the individual asylum seeker stumbles to find their feet in a new country that is equally tested by their presence. It is some of these challenges with which *Uropa* and *Republika* grapple in choreographic terms.

From the vantage point of a world in flux, and with a nod to Jacques Rancière’s (2010) understanding of aesthetics as a distribution of the sensible, Bal and coauthor Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro relate *migratory aesthetics* to a characterization of the political potential of contemporary art: “In the context of art and the question of its political agency, ‘migratory’ refers to the sensate traces of the movements of migration that characterize contemporary culture” (Bal and Hernández-Navarro 2011, 10). Drawing on Jill Bennett’s reading of Rancière, the political potential of his notion of aesthetics is that its reconfigurations of the sensible provide a ground for inquiry that “redetermines

the perceptual landscape” and opens up the possibility of another way of knowing (Bennett 2011, 199). In order to comprehend the analytical specificity of choreography, however, I return to Martin, whose explorations of agency in relation to dance (1998)—and in particular his introduction of the term *choreographic agency* (2008)⁸—are helpful. Read in the context of the article at hand, my understanding of this term is that it allows certain features of the experience of migration, otherwise left behind in the drive toward assimilation and the erasure of difference, to become tangible in movements on stage and reincorporated in the discourse (2008, 75).

I also find it useful to consider the notion of migratory choreography as an analytical endeavor alongside Rancière’s idea of dialectical processes between politics and aesthetics, whereby space becomes reconfigured into “a space for the appearance of a subject” (2010, 45). As noted in the introductory chapter to *Dissensus* (2010), Rancière is concerned with the suspension of hierarchical relations in the pursuit of equality: “At the heart of dissensus, . . . are processes of dis-identification or of the undoing of the bonds tying bodies to specific places” (5). In this context “specific places” refers to hierarchical positions, the dissociation from which opens the potential of an emancipatory shift. So, to be clear, I read Rancière’s notion of “dissensus” not as a question of difference of opinion. Rather, it constitutes an intervention whereby bodies previously uncounted may become recognized as political subjects (2013, 94). However, as André Lepecki (2015) points out in his discussion of Rancière, there is a specificity to how this process unfolds in dance and choreography (46–47). In the following article, I intend to show the choreographic agency of two dance pieces created under the migratory condition. They enable not only the recognition of political subjects but also the materialization of spaces of resistance to notions of “the migrant,” tropes of migration, and a political discourse that tends to reduce complexity.

My analytic approach to the dance performances of *Uropa* and *Republika* is attentive to the interrelationship between the dance pieces and the ongoing legislative changes in Denmark, where the human rights of asylum seekers are under increasing duress. These dance pieces, each in their own way, engage the migration stories of the asylum seekers in an attempt to allow for their appearance as individual human beings in the eyes of the members of the audience. As *choreographic* interventions, whether willingly or unwillingly, they also manifest traces of the experience carried in the body and on the skin. In the following article, I will briefly introduce the context of each performance before an analysis of selected scenes. It will be suggested that while the two dance pieces, in a similar manner to *The Grey People*, reference images and narrative structures familiar from representations of migration in the media and other contemporary works of art, it is in their articulation of embodied experiences of displacement that they exceed the schematic. Ultimately, through a comparative reading of the closing scenes of *Uropa* and *Republika*, it will be argued that it is not least in the final minutes of the performances that their choreographic potential for creating spaces of resistance that involves both the performers and the members of the audience is put to the test.

Uropa—An Asylum Ballet

Signaling topicality of subject matter in relation to the refugee crisis and the political debate on immigration, the first part of the title of *Uropa* fuses *uro*—the Danish term for unsettled, or disturbed—and Europe. The second part, *An Asylum Ballet*, establishes the unusual connection between the theme of asylum and a work of ballet. A coproduction between a dance company and a theater company, and with an artistic team comprising two choreographers (Tim Matiakis and Esther Lee Wilkinson), a stage director (Christian Lollike), and a dramaturge (Solveig Gade),⁹ the work fuses verbal and choreographic material that is shared on stage by the cast of six ballet dancers, six asylum seekers, and a musician, regardless of professional training and legal status. The analysis draws on my experience of the performance in the A-Studio of the Royal Danish Theatre as well as reviews and video documentation. I have, moreover, had access

to contextual information in the shape of a report (Mors 2016) and a reflexive article on the production (Gade 2019), insights from which will frame the analysis.

Gade discusses *Uropa* in the context of the ongoing critical discussion on the attempts of artists and cultural workers “to address the situation of refugees and migrants in formats which often blur the line between art and activism” (2019, 156). Rather than frame the asylum seekers as either *threats* or *victims*, the artistic team considered them as collaborative partners and intended to present them “as subjects with an agency” (157). In line with these intentions, it was decided to leave all major decisions about the manner in which their situation should be presented in their own hands. While the press reception of the premiere is sympathetic, the performance is also criticized for lacking dramaturgical tension (Bredsdorff 2016). As shown in Gade’s account, the artistic team soon realizes that

the envisaged antagonizing and socially disruptive gesture of the performance is missing. Consequently, we are left with a performance that while indeed allowing the participating asylum seekers to speak for themselves, fails to confront the audience with the doubt and ambiguity they might be experiencing when confronted with the narratives on stage. (2019, 158)

Within days, the rare event of a post-premiere change was announced, which involved the introduction of a disembodied voice asking some of the critical questions at the forefront of the political debate, such as “Why here?” and “How many can we take?” The performance I attended was of the revised version of *Uropa*.

In the opening scene, the performers introduce themselves by name and share a few biographical details interspersed with gestures or short movement phrases. Spoken in their own voices and their own tongues, the lines are also provided in translation, either by a fellow dancer or the anonymous voice *deus ex machina*. A text projected on the backdrop provides factual information about the ten asylum seekers in the original cast. By the time of the premiere, one had been deported, two had gone underground after having been denied asylum, and yet another had been jailed for a criminal offense. Highlighting the stark reality of the asylum seekers’ precarious life situation, the deportee joined the performance momentarily via a video-filmed Skype conversation from an undisclosed address in Paris.

The remaining asylum seekers are Samson Samere, a young Eritrean, who tells of his arrival in Denmark after crossing the Sahara and the Mediterranean and losing his parents on the way; Elian Dawood and Salam Susu, about whom the audience learns that they fled Syria on account of political persecution and the bombings that destroyed the city of Homs. Dawood and Susu demonstrate their musical skills and share glimpses of their hopes for a future in which they can again practice professionally as musicologists. There is Jesca Brenda, a young woman from Uganda, who fled to Denmark after being persecuted for her same-sex preference and accusations of being a witch; and Nayzar Hla Tin, who belongs to an oppressed Muslim minority in Burma, and in her introduction does her best to convince the audience that “I am adaptable, I can be whoever you want me to be.” The sixth person is Ali Ishaq, a dancer, who fled Pakistan because his very existence as a transgender person threatened the safety of his family.

Alongside the verbally transmitted information, brief movement sequences underline the embodied presence of the asylum seekers, adding a choreographic dimension to their materialization as subjects and fellow human beings in the eyes of the audience. In between and during these scenes, the ballet dancers function as facilitators by, for instance, moving props around, lending voice to the narratives, or joining the dancing. A closer look at the relations between professionals and nonprofessionals on stage demonstrates how the movement material may disturb the narrative fragments in ways that configure “new perceptual landscapes” and new understandings. As a case in point, I turn to a scene in



Photo 1. *Republika*, choreographer Edhem Jesenković, *Dansehallerne*, Copenhagen 2016. Photography by Søren Meisner, © rfnt.dk.

which Samere gives a verbal account of torture during imprisonment, which is one of the few times the professional dancers take center stage. In this scene, in which the delicate line between reality and fiction, presentation and representation, is overstepped, the dancers engage in a jumping sequence, the strain of which is visibly and audibly enhanced as plastic bags are pulled over their heads while they are forced to continue jumping. Hence, the distance between the embodied experiences of the dancers and Samere's experience of being stifled under torture is bridged in a choreographed act of physical endurance that leaves the dancers gasping for air.

A different instance, where to my mind the distance between the two groups of performers is reinforced, is the scene in which Benjamin Buza, one of the ballet dancers, shares with the audience the biographical information that his parents were Bosnian refugees. This story serves to remind the audience of others with a similar background who have successfully integrated. However, in comparison with the physical presence of the asylum seekers on stage, it is evident that the dancer, in a similar manner to the other professionals of the Royal Danish Ballet, is at home—confident in his body, his movement vocabulary, the theater institution, and the A-studio. Like the rest of the cast of light-pigmented and similarly built ballet dancers, his body is shaped by years of training; as a result he is able to meticulously articulate an extensive repertoire of expressions, and little if anything is unintentionally revealed about his personal stories. By contrast, the asylum seekers are not only more diverse in terms of stature and skin color, their physicality and movements are also more personal, suggesting numerous stories beyond those we hear, some of which are neither easily shed nor shared. While the combination of narration and movements succeeds in rendering the asylum seekers visible as individuals with a past, a present, and a future, their performance alongside the ballet dancers also becomes an (unintentional?) example of the observation made by Brandstetter et al. that “migrating bodies are often bodies in crisis or in unstable conditions, in unfamiliar (infra-) structures and constellations” (2019, 5; parenthesis in original). While the words of the asylum seekers grant the audience generous glimpses of the events and hopes that had them flee their homes, what is corporeally revealed is that they are displaced and their dreams put on hold, a

bit like their breathing, while they wait to find out if they are *in* or *out*. In this sense, not only do the contrasting corporealities of the cast reveal the impact of the external circumstances on their appearance in the performance, they also reinforce structures of power inherent in the institution. Noting her uncertainty about the experience of the performers in *Uropa*, Gade, in her concluding reflections, is attentive to the delicate balance between aesthetic and ethical concerns (2019, 159). From my own position as a member of the audience, I found that the incongruence in terms of corporeal stage presence on the part of the ballet dancers and the asylum seekers rendered the attempts at creating a collaborative space on stage, in which the agency of the professionals and the nonprofessionals could be perceived as equal, only partially successful.

Republika

Edhem Jesenković, in the quote at the beginning of this article, states his wish to address the experience of all those “fleeing from one life to another.” Speaking of the solo performance *Republika*, his choreographic intents echo Martin’s suggestion that dance may show us “how we pass from one state to another” in ways both literal and allegorical. This said, I contend that the displacement with which he is concerned is first and foremost a displacement from “place.” Born in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Jesenković was living with his parents in Sarajevo in 1992 when the city was besieged. Having fled to Sweden, where the family was granted political asylum, he graduated as a dancer from the Royal Swedish Ballet Academy in 1999 and made his debut as choreographer in 2011. I saw *Republika* in the Multiplé Dance Festival in Trondheim, Norway, in 2017 and interviewed the choreographer on the same occasion. Subsequently, I have had access to a video recording of one of the last rehearsals prior to the premiere.

The experience of having been a refugee is always present in Jesenković’s work, even though it is rarely made explicit. In *Republika*, however, the choreography engages with otherwise repressed traumas of living under siege at the time of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, of the radical experience of escape, of leaving the familiar behind, of reaching out to strangers and the ongoing struggle of translation between the known and the unknown, of unbecoming and becoming anew. In connection with the premiere, the choreographer elaborated on the impact of these experiences on his creative endeavor:

The experience of escaping war and the existential crisis associated with having to reinvent myself will resonate in me for the rest of my life. . . . Many years after, it has become necessary for me to look back at these experiences and come to terms with the consequences they have had on the reality I am part of now. (Jesenković 2016)

Seen in conjunction with the ambition to embrace not only his own story but the story of all refugees, the choreography of *Republika* fuses a first- and a third-person perspective in the treatment of the embodied experiences of a character intimately known to Jesenković, namely his father.¹⁰ The underlying biographical material tangentially references the narrative structure of the archetypal narrative of migration as it relates to the time before and after the actual flight from Sarajevo. The focus is, however, on the existential difficulties involved in making the decision to flee and on arriving, as a refugee, in an unknown place bearing the scars of war. In this sense, the piece addresses the theme of estrangement in the manner discussed by Ahmed as an act of “reaching out to the ‘out of placeness’ of other migrant bodies” (2000, 94).

The scenes of the performance, on which I dwell below, have been selected for their ability to choreographically reconfigure the experience of migration in ways that challenge the spectators to consider the complexity of coexisting realities in migratory societies.

Upon entering the dark space of the theater, the members of the audience pass closely by a male figure. Costumed only in white trunks, he faces the entrance, standing immobile with an inward gaze—and for a long time. On the stage are white Styrofoam blocks and a few pieces of furniture. The blocks form a crumbling wall and a disorderly line downstage that separates the audience from the playing area. Stage left is a simple wooden chair and a small typewriter table. Behind the furniture, the remnants of a wall are suspended in midair. Stage right is an old iron bed with white sheets. In the middle, a large lampshade is suspended from the ceiling. The audience seating is made up of Styrofoam bricks of a slightly larger size than those on stage.

Following a blackout, the figure at the entrance starts to move: laboriously configuring his limbs around the act of shifting his weight, the dancer slowly backs into the space of the stage. Drawn a little to the front of the body, his arms hang parallel from the shoulders, and the joints of the legs bend at odd angles that would not normally be articulated in the simple act of walking. Sporadic shivers in the neck and torso underline the incoherency of his movements. The almost catatonic body continues its stifled and twitching motion while the gaze remains introspective. At center stage, the dancer pauses in profile with the hands covering his scrotum as he very slowly leans the torso back to look up to the ceiling. In one sudden move, as he shifts to face the audience, the light above his head switches on, with a yellow light that flickers as if the power is about to fail. Focusing his attention on the bricks that separate the stage space from the audience, and with a heightened sense of determination, the dancer proceeds to move the blocks in order to construct the fragile wall of what can be perceived as the personal and political space of *his* republic. A microphone on the floor amplifies the sound of the blocks as they are meticulously stacked and nudged into place. Adding an electronic bass to the “thump” of the blocks, the sounds hint at a melodic tune interspersed with the distant thunder of detonating bombs. While continuing his self-assigned task of moving the bricks, yet another layer is added to the soundscape as the dancer speaks in a muffled voice to himself in Bosnian.

While the opening scene offers insights into the corporeal and mental struggle to physically move one’s limbs in the face of traumatic experiences, the looping movement sequence, to which I now turn, connects the challenges involved in making the decision to flee, to the trials involved in resettling in a new life devoid of preexisting social networks. First, the dancer bounces on the bed in a lying position followed by the motions of getting up, getting dressed, and attempting but failing to step into the uncertainty of the world. He then undresses and returns once more to bouncing on the bed. When he finally leaves the safe but constricted space, bold steps take him across the line separating the performance space from the audience. Establishing eye contact, the dancer approaches individual spectators only to make a sudden halt, draw back, and pull the T-shirt over his head, followed by another looping sequence of starting and stopping as if struggling to trust his social abilities in the unknown territory in which he finds himself. In these aborted movement sequences, the choreography captures the experience of migration as a perpetual state of displacement, the painful effects of which impact at an existential level.

Rococo Frenzy and Silent Reproach

Below, I will look in more detail at the closing scenes of *Uropa* and *Republika* in order to determine how—visually as well as choreographically—they implicate the spectators as members of the communities into which the asylum seekers have entered.

With the repeated tragic news of the lives of refugees lost in the Mediterranean, it is no wonder that the sea has been configured as a visual trope related to migration across the arts. A significant example from video art is John Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea* (2015), a montage of images exploring the state of fluidity. Toward the end of *Uropa*, the frothing sea runs as a backdrop for close to six minutes. Figuratively and metaphorically depicting an abyss, the water masses threaten to overflow the entire

stage and wash away both the performers and the audience. Meanwhile, in front of the screen, an almost surreal eighteenth-century masquerade is played out. Costumed in powdered wigs, masks, and rococo attire, the entire cast performs a *tableau vivant* that opens with the formal moves of Les Lanciers to the accompaniment of the musician on stage. As noted by Gade, the elaborate costumes were first picked out by Dawood in the preparatory workshop, when the asylum seekers were invited to choose a piece of clothing in the theater wardrobes (2019, 157).

A contemporary example of Homi K. Bhabha's (1984) notion of colonial mimicry,¹¹ the above scene inscribes itself in an interesting row of art works offering a critical perspective on the Enlightenment from an Africanist perspective. Once more, Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* comes to mind with its repeated images of persons of African descent dressed in costumes from paintings of the time. The ambivalence of these images relies on their appropriation *and* mockery of colonial representations of power. At the same time, they serve as a subtle reminder that the era of instrumental reason was also an era of slavery, colonialism, and, as Akomfrah reminds us, what has retrospectively proven to be a systematic destruction of the ecological system in which we live—all in the name of science (2015). Other examples are seen in the work of Yinka Shonibare MBE, whose sculptures and film characters appropriate corporeal stances, movements, and costumes from the eighteenth century in staged tableaux that center on the gaiety associated with the leisure cultures of Europe's elite (Hobbs 2008, 24–34).

In *Uropa*, as the projections of the sea fade out, the formal dancing transitions into a frenzied *danse macabre* accentuated by flashes of a stroboscopic light. In this, the closing scene of the asylum ballet, well over three centuries are collapsed into one apocalyptic image that ends abruptly with a black-out. Both in Copenhagen and on tour, *Uropa*'s audiences responded with standing ovations. Theater scholars Erik Exe Christoffersen and Ida Krøgholt (2016), in their review of the performance, read the nature of the applause and the passing of flowers between spectators, performers, and back as an act of bonding and a silent gesture of shared recognition that the many challenging questions raised in the performance have no easy answers. An alternative, and rather more cynical understanding of the response, is suggested if read from the point of view of theater scholar Baz Kershaw's (2001), writing on the history of applause in the theater. Positing ovations as a dimension of audience participation that is both performative and generative of a sense of community, Kershaw argues that standing ovations are *the* predominant mode of participation in the "consumerist theatre" of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Pointing to the self-reflexive nature of audience response, he writes: "The quality of applause is an index of a widening chasm between performance and its socio-political context because applause becomes fatally tinged with a narcissistic self-regard. The standing ovation becomes an orgasm of self-congratulation for money so brilliantly spent . . ." (141). A reading through this lens suggests that the standing ovation after *Uropa*—rather than bringing the choreographic work, the performers on stage, and the social reality in which the piece exists into closer proximity of one another—widens the distance between them. This conclusion cannot, however, be established without considering the artistic intentions, the creative process, and the verbal and choreographic material preceding the climactic and abrupt ending of *Uropa*'s rococo frenzy. I maintain a position between the two alternatives: On the one hand, I found the performance momentarily successful in bridging the "chasm between performance and its sociopolitical context," between presentation and representation, as seen for example in the interplay between narration and dancing in the torture scene. On the other hand, my reading of the physical copresence of the untrained and potentially traumatized asylum seekers alongside the professional dancers in several of the other scenes pointed to unresolved issues regarding "the politics of collaboration and representation" (Gade 2019, 156). Seen in this light, the triggering of the audience's enthusiastic response to the dramatic ending left little room for self-reflexivity beyond a sympathetic, yet illusory, expression of a shared predicament. The uncertainty as to what was applauded may well have been intentional on the part of the artistic team. In any case, the ambiguity of the ovation remained with me for quite a while.

In *Republika*'s closing scene, the dancer persists in his attempts to establish meaningful contact with individual members of the audience, taking hold of their hands, asking them questions, and expressing increasing frustration at not making himself understood. He finally resigns and returns to the stage, where he places the table with a small projector facing a chair on which he seats himself. As the projector starts running, the image of a group of people is projected on his chest in the area of the heart. It takes a minute before I realize that it comes from a camera directed at us, the audience. Back on his feet, the dancer frantically begins to stack the free-seating blocks from the audience area on the stage and encourages the spectators to help him in raising yet another wall with the blocks we have been sitting on. Once the audience, eager to be of assistance, takes over the construction, the dancer sits back on the chair. As the wall builds taller he gradually becomes obscured, leaving the audience looking at the projected image of themselves.

In stark contrast to the closing image of *Uropa*, the choreographer/dancer of *Republika* concludes the performance isolated behind a wall completed by the audience. As the projections from the camera continue, the side door to the auditorium opens onto the streets of Trondheim while the dancer remains seated in silent reproach: "You shut me out!" In this gesture, Jesenković turns the spotlight back at the audience as if to ask: What is your part in this? *Republika*'s closing gesture forced the spectators to look back at themselves in a critical rather than a congratulatory manner. The dancer's insistence on maintaining the physical separation between us disrupts the expectations of a conventional closure to the performance, and one is left without the absolution and sense of community granted if he had stood up to receive our applause. In the interview with Jesenković, I learnt that the audience in one of the Copenhagen performances insisted on acknowledging the performer face-to-face. In a spontaneous defiance of the proposal to leave the room, they tore down the wall.¹²

Conclusion

In answer to the question of choreography's potential for creating spaces of resistance that disrupt the discourse on migration, its tropes, and universalization of the figure of "the migrant," I have examined selected scenes in *Uropa* and *Republika* in terms of their choreographic articulation of experiences of forced migration. Even if the asylum seekers' dancing alongside professional ballet dancers in *Uropa* raises ethical questions, the piece grants them corporeal presence and a first-person voice in a public space from which they are otherwise excluded. In *Republika*, the choreographer's fusion of a first- and third-person perspective effectively communicates the experience of existential struggles of forced migration, such as the fear of leaving the familiar behind and the desire for meaningful social contacts. My analysis suggests, moreover, that the dance pieces, each in its own way, function as choreographic interventions in a nonconsensual society, in which the heated debate on immigration is ongoing. Through choreographic means such as forced jumping, being stifled (*Uropa*), and choreographed catatonic movement sequences (*Republika*), the corporeally embedded traces of migration are rendered sensible to the spectators. Whether the invitation is verbal, gestural, or visceral, *Uropa* and *Republika* reach out with choreographic agency in order to engage their audiences in the corporeal and existential dilemmas of the migratory condition of which we are all a part. The copresence of spectators and performers for the duration of the performances provides the potential for the emergence of spaces of resistance, the corporeality of which bypasses the narrative tropes of a theater of migration, de-ontologizes the migrant, and offers firsthand articulations of migration that momentarily exceed representation.

In my discussion of *Uropa* and *Republika*, I mention examples from other art forms, such as theater, film, sculpture, and cartoons, in which the thematic treatment, the narrative, the visual, and even the movement motifs are similar. However, with theoretical support from dance scholars Martin (1998, 2008), Lepecki (2015), Prickett (2016), Noland and Ness (2008), my analysis supports the claim that choreography is unique in terms of its potential for making the experience

of different forms of displacement tangibly felt—and for disrupting the increasingly prevailing notions of a consensual society in which tropes and normative categories reign.

Notes

1. *Eurovision Song Contest Semi Finals 1*. 2016. [YouTube video]. May 10, 2016.
2. Andreas Nordstrøm, “Flyktingtema i Eurovision-dans”, *Arbetsbladet*, May 10, 2016.
3. Mathilde Albinsson, “Budskapstark mellanakt i Eurovision. Vi skapar värme och hopp”, SVT, May 5, 2016.
4. Jack Shepherd, “Eurovision will give focus to the refugee crisis despite Sweden’s stance on border control”, *The Independent*, April 4, 2016.
5. *Uropa – En asyl ballet*. Stage direction: Christian Lollike. Choreography: Esther Lee Wilkinson and Tim Matiakis. Text: Peter Clement Woetmann, Solveig Gade, and Christian Lollike in collaboration with the performers. Dramaturgy: Solveig Gade. Scenography: Kim Fridbjørg. Light: Anders Poll. Music: Mikkel Hess. Production: CORPUS in collaboration with The Royal Danish Theatre. A-salen, The Royal Danish Theatre. January 29–February 20, 2016.
6. *Republika* was premiered on February 2, 2016, and played for a week at Dansehallerne, Copenhagen’s venue for contemporary choreography. It has since been performed in various festivals in Europe.
7. Three years after the law was agreed to, statistics from the Danish National Police show the result of a total of ten confiscations at the Danish border to be € 25,000, one car, and no jewelry. Government representatives, continuing to claim L87 to be a success, refer to the law’s preventative effects, rendering Denmark a less attractive destination for asylum seekers and an allegedly more secure nation (Ritzau 2019).
8. For a discussion of the term *choreographic agency*, see also Prickett (2016) and Lepecki (2015).
9. The same artistic team had in the previous season created the award-winning performance *I FØLING – en krigsballet* (In Feeling – A War Ballet), in which professional dancers of the Royal Danish Ballet danced alongside Danish veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. *I Føling – En krigsballet* (2015). [ballet]. Stage direction: Christian Lollike. Choreography: Esther Lee Wilkinson and Tim Matiakis. Dramaturgy: Solveig Gade. Aarhus Theatre and The Royal Danish Theatre, January 17–June 09.
10. The intergenerational approach of *Republika* is similar to the narrative trajectory of *Dansker-triologen* (the Dane Trilogy), an award-winning cartoon by Danish author and visual artist Halfdan Pisket. The first volume, *Desertør* (2014), tracks the life of Pisket’s father from his upbringing in a small village in the border between Turkey and Armenia to his service in and escape from the Turkish army, the capture followed by imprisonment and torture. In the second volume, *Kakerlak* [cockroach] (2015), he arrives in Denmark to begin a life as an immigrant worker. Finally, in *Dansker* [Dane] (2016), the cartoon follows the father’s criminal *déroute*, his time in prison, and ultimately his last years as an aging Danish citizen.
11. In a development of Lacan’s notion of mimicry, Bhabha (1984) discusses colonial mimicry as a double articulation that is at one and the same time a visualization of power and a partial appropriation/representation through which the colonial subject is recognized.
12. Notes from interview with Edhem Jesenković. February 11, 2017. Unpublished.

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