'White People All Over': Refugee Performance, Fictional Aesthetics, and Dramaturgies of Alterity-Empathy

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📅 Published online: 02 Sep 2020.

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2. Although the Portuguese word *passajar* is similar to *passagem* (passage), *passageiro* (passenger), and *passar* (passing through), it means sewing long and loose stitches that hold the fabric temporarily in place, before sewing it in definite form. The *passajar* performance project was jointly created by André Júnior (musician), Margarida Gonçalves (actress/dancer), Maria Ramos (choreographer/dancer), Estêvão Antunes (actor/director), facilitator Madalena Victorino (choreographer), and the following participants: Birivan Moustafa, Haitham Khatib, Josephine Manjonjo, Jugaulond Manira, Júnior Manira Shema, Khoshnaf Alosh, Millicent Matambanadro, Miriam Santos, Mirna Moustafa, Mohamed Yahya Dabah, Patrícia Quirós, Rohaf Alosh, and Valerie Mayo.

3. Donia Mounsef and Mai Hussein, 'Performing Translocal Memory: Testament and Testimony in Contemporary Theatre and Performance', *Revista de estudios globales y arte contemporaneo* 2, no. 2 (2014): 139–61 (155).

'White People All Over': Refugee Performance, Fictional Aesthetics, and Dramaturgies of Alterity-Empathy

Szabolcs Musca and Graça P. Corrêa[1]

Over a two month period during the summer of 2017, we followed the production process of *Passajar*, an immersive participatory performance project in Lisbon (Portugal), collaboratively created by four theatre-makers and recent refugees from Congo, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Zimbabwe.[2] The production was developed as part of Lisbon's *Festival Todos*, a publicly funded and socially engaged performing arts initiative that has been running for more than a decade, functioning as social intervention through arts in inner neighbourhoods with a high proportion of migrant and marginalised communities. Facilitated and curated by the festival's artistic director, Madalena Victorino, this multidimensional performance work was an important (albeit limited) experiment in searching for potential new forms of migrant theatre and refugee performance.

In this article, we critically revisit *Passajar*, both performance-process and performance-product, focusing on three interlinked issues evoked by our experience of closely observing the creative process and of watching the production. Firstly, we look at how this particular project relates to and addresses *difference* in actual creative practice, and more generally, how such refugee performances 'bind "one" to another without collapsing the "I" or the "Other" into a totalizing "we"'.[3] Secondly, we examine what kind of aesthetics working with refugee participants generates, and what are the performative means and dramaturgical processes by which such aesthetics of refugeedom are being produced. Lastly, we question the ethical positions deployed in *Passajar*, highlighting that by the very decision of producing a performance work with refugees, the

theatre collective tapped into multiple individual and communal identities, histories, and ideologies. In shifting the focus from representation to encounter, whereby the feeling of displacement was collectively explored and played out physically by resident facilitators and refugee participants alike, *Passajar*'s performance opened up an affective and ethical space of experience for the practice of both self-transformation and empathy towards alterity. Although the creative team devised *Passajar*'s collective work based on 'displacement' as a broadened identifier, both the rehearsal process and resulting performances successfully expressed the complexities and differences of individual refugees' personal histories and their actual experiences of being dislocated from home and their own language. In this sense, we suggest that *Passajar*'s humanist-driven fictional aesthetics offers an example of a more inclusive dramaturgy on human rights, evocative of the 'open ethics' sustained by philosophers Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze. By managing to articulate an arena of shared struggle without losing sight of particular spheres of belonging, the performance process and product were, we would argue, both identitarian and universal.

Arguably having a personal impact on participants' lives, all acts of representation, narration, and participation carry ethical-political choices and implications with them.[4] Emma Cox observes how 'migration is, at its heart, about encounters with foreignness – with foreign people, and with foreign places'.[5] Consequently, 'theatre of migration pays attention to imagining the contact zone between those who arrive and those who lay claim to ownership or custodianship over a territory. But who does the imagining?'.[6] Moreover, we ask, what are the ethics of such encounters and the dramaturgical politics of such imagining? Does affective and empathy-driven 'open ethics'[7] enable agency to refugee participants (within and beyond the artistic realm), facilitating new understandings on refugeedom, or does it, on the contrary, neutralise refugee identities, dissolving them in the aesthetic frame of the performance?

Alongside ethical considerations, inside and surrounding performance, we cannot help but reflect on our position as *voyeurs* of the creative process and, as such, of being informed/embedded spectators of the final production. As part of an international research network (Migrant Dramaturgies Network), we followed the devising process as observers of the creative process with the hope of gaining insight into the actual practices that dealt directly with refugeedom in a performance setting. In our first meeting with the creative team, we agreed to attend rehearsals on a rolling basis, suspending our attendance if, and whenever participants felt uncomfortable with our presence. Our attendance was limited in scope and duration to rehearsal observation, understanding the production team's responsibility and duty of care towards refugee participants and the smooth running of the production process. Following the consent of all participants, we gained close familiarity with refugee experiences. Although we were able to conduct follow-up interviews with all four theatre-makers and the festival's artistic director over the autumn of 2017, our engagement with individual refugee participants was limited to conversations during the intervals of the rehearsal process.

4. See James Thompson, 'Digging up Stories: An Archaeology of Theatre in War', *TDR The Drama Review* 48, no. 3 (2004): 150–64.

5. Emma Cox, *Theatre and Migration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 3.

6. Ibid., 4–5.

7. See Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).

8. Conselho Português Para os Refugiados, Centro de Acolhimento para Refugiados, http://cpr.pt/centro-de-acolhimento-para-refugiados-car/ (accessed March 1, 2019).

As per above, this was due to both practical (access-related), but also ethical concerns. Because the production team had a formal agreement with Lisbon's Refugee Reception Centre (CAR),[8] participants' time spent outside the centre was limited to the actual duration of the rehearsals, giving little opportunity for lengthy semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, post-project interviews would have also required obtaining visiting rights through CAR, unlikely to be granted due to strict security measures in place at refugee centres, and us not having any formal relationship with either the refugee participants or the festival organisation. Likewise, conducting full interviews would have been ethically questionable given the vulnerability and insecurity of the refugees' situation.

In effect, as we will discuss in the next section of this article, we became aware of the fragility of the refugee participants at the beginning of the performance process. We became conscious that any interview setting could easily evoke parallels with formal interrogations led by immigration officials and endured by most refugees upon their arrival in Europe, hence disrupting the performance process and, most importantly, the delicate balance of their personal lives. Despite such limitations, our conversations were significant and insightful. We hope that positioning refugee voices at the centre of our analysis will shift the inevitable hierarchies often unintentionally present in refugee performances facilitated by non-refugee artists.[9] Here, testimonies and conversations with refugee and non-refugee creators sit alongside each other, guiding us through the performance process and the production. In this article we only use personal testimonies that were either shared publicly (e.g. in the case of Haitham Khatib, see section 'Ethics of a Dramaturgy of Affects'), or within the group with consent from respective participants.

9. See Keziah Berelson and Tamsin Cook, 'Recognizing Voice and Redistributing Power: Community Theatre with Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Leeds', *Performing Ethos* 9, no.1 (2019): 67–79.

10. Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 388.

Although we are aware that theatre acts as an 'institutionalised space for voyeurism', in migrant theatre such spectatorial gazing is highly problematic as it is very much linked to acts of witnessing.[10] As we will discuss later on (see section 'Fictional Aesthetics'), *Passajar* actively positioned the audiences as witnesses by exposing refugee and non-refugee performers in stand-alone scenes, the audience being encouraged to walk around, look, and observe sequences from close proximity, performers often interacting with the spectators. Throughout the rehearsal process and during performance, *Passajar* operated as a space for genuine engagement where witnessing also meant being conscious of the ethical responsibilities involved.

Aiming for an aesthetics that suspends the borders between refugees and non-refugee creators, displaced lives and artists' living conditions, both in performance and reception, *Passajar* shifted the focus from *representation* to *encounter*. As co-creators Maria Ramos and Estêvão Antunes recall, in their personal interviews, the main objective was to develop a performance inspired by the encounter with refugee participants, a collective work *with* them, not *about* them. Antunes further argues that refugee realities are hard, if not impossible to be conveyed theatrically or artistically, especially by non-refugee artists. Such an

11. Emma Cox and Marilena Zaroulia, 'Mare Nostrum, or on Water Matters', *Performance Research* 21, no. 2 (2016): 141–9 (147).

12. Mounsef and Hussein, 'Performing Translocal Memory', 140.

13. A good example of such narrative-focused migrant theatre is *The Jungle* written by Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson and co-produced by the Young Vic and the National Theatre, London in 2017. The production tells the story of the Calais Refugee Camp.

14. Graça P. Corrêa, 'Ethical Challenges in Adaptation: Gothic *Eurico* from Novel to Performance', in *Ethical Exchanges in Translation, Adaptation and Dramaturgy*, ed. Emer O'Toole, Andrea Pelegri Kristić and Stuart Young (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2017), 103–18 (104).

15. Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 190.

16. Ibid., 90–3.

17. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 177.

upfront admittance reverberates familiar concerns regarding theatre's limited potential to tackle issues of refugeedom.[11]

In assessing the potential impact of migrant theatre concerned with traumatic testimonies, Donia Mounsef and Mai Hussein argue that a common challenge in such theatre practices is 'the relationship of performance to language and its insufficient expression of the effect of violence on shattered people and their individual and collective experience on the stage'.[12] In *Passajar*, the creative team made a deliberate choice to avoid directly telling, re-enacting, or mediating complex refugee testimonies. With this stance they also turned away from traditional forms of migrant theatre, rejecting both mainstream testimony-focused models (e.g. documentary, verbatim, testimonial, and forum theatre) and narrative-driven theatrical 're-enactments' of specific personal refugee stories or events.[13] Instead, rooted in a communitarian understanding of humanism as well as building on their aesthetic grounding (all four theatre-makers have a strong track record of work in physical theatre, contemporary dance, and experimental performance), the group opted for a mosaic or sequential performance format, employing processes of abstraction and modalities of non-realistic representation.

By switching from the *real* to the *fictitious*, the group aimed to render personal accounts and deeply rooted traumas 'universal'. Arguably, this practice goes against the construction of victimhood narratives, but also refrains from political statements, hence seriously limiting the performance's potential to enhance empowerment. Because collaborative processes in theatre often involve an inclusive non-judgmental approach of tending to one another, they risk sacrificing – especially when they are consensus-driven – valuable dramaturgical possibilities towards performance, in terms of ethical-political effects.[14] In the case of *Passajar*, as we will discuss below, the collective deliberately and consensually refrained from making politically explicit dramaturgical choices, and hence avoided the use of testimonies with manifest oppositional implications (e.g. against political oppression in Syria or Zimbabwe).

Contrary to verbatim performance that 'draws theatre away from its association with fictional representation, towards a notion of the stage as a public platform for debate',[15] *Passajar* can be seen as a piece of dramaturgy best associated with postdramatic theatre,[16] in that it dissolves traditional theatrical hierarchies and relationships, and 'deconstruct[s] the space of political discourse … through the dismantling of discursive certainties of the political'.[17] In effect, by rejecting overt political discourse, postdramatic theatre seldom challenges normative morality and existing social configurations. However, one cannot dissociate art/aesthetics or theatre/dramaturgy from political and ethical action. Theatre, both as performing-process and performance-product, is a forum for the exchange of ideas and affects; it is a public and collective art connected to the *polis*, which examines and debates its ethical guidelines and practices. Thus, although it does not have to commit to a prescriptive political stance, dramaturgy is inevitably a political and ethical practice.

In the following section, we will look at the performance process, focusing on the engagement between refugee and non-refugee creators

with a special emphasis on how spaces and bodies were (de/re)constructed and shared corporeal landscapes created. As Madalena Victorino asserted in a rehearsal on 20 June 2017: 'art is a power house for transformation, trans-figuration and change, and what we will see is a performance that looks at life through an artistic gaze'.

On Suspension: Refugees, Performance, and Difference

The first discussion between the four theatre-makers and the facilitator of *Passajar*, Madalena Victorino, attempted to draw parallels between the lives of refugees and those of independent performance artists working in Portugal today, so as to find points of connection to build upon. At that time the collective claimed that 'we are all migrants, we are all in one way or other from somewhere else'. This universalising generality eschews the blatant up-rootedness of refugees, the segregation and violence they are subject to, due to the condition of being both homeless and stateless. As Hannah Arendt observes, although alluding to the historical context of the 1940s, refugees are human beings who have lost their home, occupation, language, and also 'the unaffected expression of feelings' or familiarity of daily life.[18] Thus, operating with such a generic identity, of 'humanity' as such, not only tends to generalise individual experiences but also elide cultural differences and the relationships of force and influence within collective performance encounters.

On the other hand, a focus on individual and cultural identity always emphasises specificity and singularity, rather than membership within a larger set of human shared experiences and collective struggles. Questioning the efficacy of identity as an over-arching strategy of contemporary performance and critical theory, Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh argue that 'by assuming the primacy of identitarian sameness/difference, and the efficacy of this representation, we risk missing alternative ways of thinking, doing, and framing politics, and the matter of living'.[19] Although it emphasised a shared horizon and a universal displacement through collective encounter and collaborative practice, *Passajar* did not reinscribe categories of homogenising sameness nor of essentialising difference. What lies at the heart of *Passajar*'s performance of displacement is not an idealised human figure – the migrant/displaced Other – but rather a multiply differentiated performing human, expressed through an aesthetics of affect whereby 'the universal does not elide difference but rather contains it'.[20]

Indeed, within this encounter with foreignness, this contact zone between those who arrive and those who reside, it is accurate to argue that many residents – both artists and spectators – also feel a sense of uprootedness, of being displaced and dispossessed. This of course references acute adversities and a series of national and regional crises in Portugal, namely: the urban housing crisis and the crisis in urban ecologies due to aggressive tourism in recent years, environmental crisis especially after the disastrous wildfires in 2017, and the crisis of the arts and research funding due to budget cuts. Analysing such systemic

18. Hannah Arendt, 'We Refugees', in *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*, ed. Marc Robinson (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 110–19 (110).

19. Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh, 'Introduction', in *Performance, Identity and the Neo-Political Subject*, ed. Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh (London & NY: Routledge, 2013), 1–20 (1-2).

20. Ibid., 4.

21. Ana Bigotte Vieira, 'Turn, Turtle! Uso [Use], Espaço [Space] and Falta [Lack/ Missing]', in *Turn, Turtle! Reenacting the Institute*, ed. Elke Van Campenhout and Lilia Mestre (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2016), 110–23 (111).

22. Cox and Zaroulia, 'Mare Nostrum, or on Water Matters', 144.

23. Estêvâo Antunes and Maria Ramos in discussion with the authors, Lisbon, September 25, 2017 and October 12, 2017 respectively.

crises in contrast to Lisbon's recent economic upturn, Ana Bigotte Vieira states that the current socio-economic and cultural situation can only be described by inverted images, such as that of a wrecked cruise liner.[21]

In effect, the steep rise in refugees (the 'refugee crisis') and enforced movement of people of the last five years cannot be dissociated from the larger socio-economic and political interactions of which it is a manifest outcome. Driven by the neoliberal ideology that has dominated global economy during the last decades, financial and natural resources have been seized by corporations and states, at the expense of the peoples, their land, culture, and well-being; hence the rising global inequality along ethnic, gender, social, and environmental lines. As Cox and Zaroulia argue, 'the crisis ripples beyond "us" and "them" demarcations on ethnic or racial terms to expose other asymmetries of class and infra-structure …. Europe's Others do not only arrive in boats from the East; they also reside in the Eastern or Southern countries of the continent'.[22]

Equally informed by their own precarious existence as independent artists in Portugal, and by encounters with refugees and their testimonies during pre-rehearsal visits to Lisbon's Refugee Reception Centre in Bobadela, the creative team decided to build the performance around the notion of *suspension*. As Maria Ramos and Estêvão Antunes claim, when interviewed:

> The point of departure was suspension. Suspension of refugee lives, staying in a place, but always being prepared to go somewhere else [Antunes]; and suspension of our own lives as artists, the working reality in Portugal for us. We wanted to concretise this in movement and create choreographic ideas of suspension [Ramos].[23]

This concept was further elaborated during rehearsals through choreographic imagery of suspension and movement-based practices such as parkour, a training discipline developed from martial arts and primarily practised in public urban environments.

A real sense of suspension, however, only materialised during the creative process with refugees. After a series of changes in the composition of the refugee group (due to health problems and bureaucratic obstacles), participants from a multitude of ethnicities from Africa and the Middle East arrived at the festival's headquarters in Centeno Palace. As we followed them walking through the countless rooms of this seventeenth-century building richly decorated with Portuguese tiles from the colonial times, a real sense of insecurity, disorientation, and a feeling of being out of place became visible. The creative team consciously utilised this sense of displacement and started to build on the feeling of unfamiliarity in the exercises that followed. Through various warm-up exercises, movement and gesture-based techniques, voice-play, improvisations, and miming, physical connections started to arise between the participants and the space(s). Slowly, from rehearsal to rehearsal, interpersonal connections also developed among the participants, as well as between the creative team and refugees. Space and body awareness was key, and the performance process focused on corporal presence and physical interactions, among bodies, and of bodies with spaces.

As Cox and Zaroulia observe, 'the body occupies the domain of representation' in migrant theatre; in recent performances on migration and refugeedom there is an increasing 'common concern with the weight, or weightlessness, of the human body' referencing difficult sea crossings.[24] This is perhaps unsurprising, given that body and space are key markers of migrant and refugee identities. Hence, migrant theatre productions also deal with such destabilised identities in an ever more destabilised human, political, and economic environment. As Roxane Paire accurately explains:

> [T]he feeling of displacement arises from the relationship an individual has with space. The body is the physical frame of identity and it is through the body and its physical connections to the outside world that an individual will begin to define his or her identity. In the case of immigrants, these daily habits are subject to considerable alterations …. This physical connection to identity also allows each individual to position him or herself in a definite geographical location and within a particular social setting.[25]

Throughout the *Passajar* process, the feeling of displacement was explored and played out physically, resulting in a communal choreography. In an early rehearsal, Maria Ramos instructed the refugee participants: 'we are putting our fingertips in the air, holding on to the unknown' (6 September 2017). Through a combination of choreographic elements, we saw the collective performing a series of repetitive movements of falling, losing balance, feeling breathless, hopelessly searching and grabbing the air around themselves (see Figure 1). Arguably, this was one of the strongest performative elements of the creative practice and performance alike, not least because it physically evoked personal vulnerabilities in a communal effort. Besides

24. Cox and Zaroulia, 'Mare Nostrum, or on Water Matters', 146, 145.

25. Roxane Paire, 'Migrant Theatre and the Aesthetics of Identity', *Aigne Online Journal* (2011): 30–40 (33).

Figure 1. Scene From the Rehearsal Process *Passajar* at Festival Todos, Lisbon, 2017. Photo: Maria Ramos.

26. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 78.

simultaneously portraying corporeal alienation and a strong desire of belonging, it also showed a real sense of community between resident artists, volunteer dancers, and refugee participants. Sara Ahmed aptly demonstrates in *Strange Encounters* that migrants being often represented as strangers 'are the bodies out of place in the everyday world they inhabit, and in the communities in which they come to live'.[26] *Passajar* made a palpable attempt to alter such displacement at least in the socio-artistic realm of the performance.

Situations and experiences of refugee lives were transfigured into abstract representations, operating on a meta-theatrical level. Nevertheless, refugee testimonies deeply informed the direction of improvisations and individual sequences of the production. For instance, dancer Maria Ramos started to work on a duet piece with Haitham Khatib from Syria. Improvisations between the two were built on Khatib's work in Persian shadow theatre in Damascus. In our interview, Ramos recalls telling Khatib 'how in order to communicate one's suffering and pain, one does not have to describe it literally, instead dance it!' Thus, the two opted for a dance sequence where Khatib used intricate hand gestures and movements to interact with Ramos. The composition of this short duet evoked media footages of people fleeing war as well as hiding from immigration enforcement officers. Visibly, Khatib's fragile body in performance carried a deeply personal trauma.

At another stage of the rehearsal process, the shoe was chosen as the motivating object or catalyst for the refugees' journey. Accordingly, the artists-facilitators asked the refugee women from Zimbabwe – Josephine, Milicent, and Valerie – if they were willing to talk about their trip from Harari to Lisbon, 'from the point of view of their shoes/being in one's shoes'. Soon, however, as the reality of facts gained ground, this aesthetic intention centred on the shoe-object was relegated to a secondary plane: it became clear that it would be both difficult and overtly simplistic to capture these life-testimonies of survival solely through the use of shoes as objects and metaphors. These were women who fled from their country leaving behind their husbands and children, because they were actively involved in the opposition party, and therefore were pursued by the police. Their testimonies were not used in the final performance, but again inspired a number of scenes developed during the process.

One such scene was inspired by Josephine Manjonjo's recollection of their journey to Lisbon:

> I didn't know what I was going to see, who I was going to see … no one was going to receive me, it's a new place, with white people all over, it was quite scaring. But now I can say that I removed the shoes I was wearing; now I'm wearing another pair of shoes and I have hope that my life is going to change for the better. (Rehearsals, August 2017)

Developed with Margarida Gonçalves, the scene featured the three Zimbabwean women leaning against a blank white wall and in a series of synchronised movements sliding slowly, then falling, rising weakly and standing up, to then fall back again while gazing at viewers defencelessly.

As we may recognise from the examples above, *Passajar* refused to directly reference refugee stories; instead, through the concept of suspension, difference was deconstructed, and refugee identities destabilised. In our interview, Antunes recalls: 'we wanted the spectators to be uncertain of who are the refugees and who are the resident artists'. In effect, we might even argue that *refugee bodies* were neutralised by transforming them, first and foremost, into *performing bodies*. Using refugee bodies and indeed migration as metaphor is of course highly problematic. As Sara Ahmed asks:

> How can we read migrant narratives without taking for granted the stranger as a figure? Indeed, how else can we narrativise migrant subjectivities without reducing the 'stranger' to some-one that one can simply be, a being that is then premised on universality in the very loss of home?[27]

27. Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 79.

Passajar's answer is a fictional aesthetics that goes against cultural classification and racial labelling.

Fictional Aesthetics

To understand how fictional aesthetics was generated in the production of *Passajar*, we would like to return to Haitham Khatib's story. Khatib worked as shadow puppeteer at the National Theatre in Damascus and also as a censor in film editing for financial reasons. Once the civil war broke out in Syria, he left Damascus to visit his mother in Aleppo, but soon found out that his company made him redundant, because it considered his actions anti-governmental. Soon after, he decided to leave Syria. As he declares in a press review,

> It was a difficult time between the difficult times, when you see large gardens turn into great cemeteries [...] when children play in heaps of rubble and find parts of bodies and no one cares, or cries, or has feelings about it, then the survivor is also dead. The heart is an empty box. I kept my spirit safe, but I paid a great price in pain. It's like walking barefoot over bits of glass. I try to create good memories to balance these bad memories and art is a good therapy.[28]

28. Khatib qtd in Maria João Guardão, 'Celebrar os Mundos do Mundo, para Derrubar os Muros', *Diário de Notícias*, September 8, 2017, www.dn.pt/artes/interior/celebrar-os-mundos-do-mundo-para-derrubar-os-muro-8755595.html (accessed June 22, 2018).

In the opening scene of *Passajar*'s performance, Khatib welcomes audiences from the balcony of the Gomes Freire Palace singing a short *adhan* (call to prayer), while spectators wait on the other side of the road in front of the palace. Once inside, he greets audience members, saying: 'welcome to my palace! A lot has changed, I'm tired, very tired, but I very much like seeing you here ... '; Estevão Antunes repeats his words in Portuguese, acting as Khatib's double/mirror. In a subsequent scene, we see Antunes sitting on a chair in a small empty room wearing a sleeping mask and headphones, and balancing his body from one

side to the other while delivering a monologue inspired by Khatib's story:

> Sometimes you are, sometimes you're not/I carry my travels in my hands/I can go far without leaving myself/Revolution has turned into a war/I got out/I feel I lost my country/I feel that I'll never return/It's as if I were a plant that was plucked from the earth/A floorless plant/It happened when I refused/I left my palace to go nowhere/The heart/ sometimes stops to think/I have a thinking heart/I become immobile/ Everything stops/Everything becomes suspended/I'm weightless/ Nameless/Lacking touch/Lacking smell/Fifty-seven/It's me who stops/Everything else turns around me, until there are only lines/I rip the net and find myself on the other side/I no longer know where I should return/I forget/I lose myself/The spirit goes blind/It cannot remember/The hands/The memories/The Mother/The Autumn/The water/The eyes/The body/The shadow/All undefined/Effacing the Sun/Remaining but me/Only my hands and me/Only I keep myself company/I am the reflection of myself/I'm not a marionette/There is no plan/There is no plan/A touch on the shoulder occurred/Crop and erase/Delete what's there/I'm the only one who sees/My film is made up of the images that do not exist/I have thousands/They want us with no memory/No memories/Sometimes you are/Sometimes you're not.[29]

This example shows a textual and performative appropriation that keeps a referential connection with a real-life narrative, but which transforms it into a piece of performance-poetry through abstraction and (textual) fragmentation. Here, 'fictional' denotes a distancing from the real (i.e. people and events), but without recreating a new imaginary narrative. The emphasis is not on a particular testimony or indeed on who is telling the story, but instead on an aestheticised experience that might expand our understanding of reality.[30] In this sense, fictional aesthetics in this production is neither opposed to reality, nor is fully aligned with the fictitious (e.g. characters). By doing so, the dramaturgy of the production suspends identification and destabilises alterity. In such a dramaturgical construction, empathy no longer applies specifically towards refugees as victims, but acts universally towards (fictional) experiences of human existence. Hence, the fictional aesthetics produced in *Passajar* tears up problematic hierarchies between victims (refugee performers) and witnesses (audience).

As Michael Balfour points out, refugee performance is highly problematic precisely because 'it immediately sets up a fixed orientation between subject (the presence of the refugee voice) and the non-refugee audience (witness)'.[31] As a result, applied theatre projects with refugees often end up reinforcing victimhood narratives through their focus on helping marginalised communities:

> The paradox of refugee performance is that it can imply the production of a secure map of experience, by fixing testimonial points and coordinates, which make an encounter with alterity more elusive.[32]

29. Antunes monologue, translated by the authors.

30. Michael Balfour, 'Refugee Performance: Encounters with Alterity', Journal of Arts and Communities 2, no. 3 (2012): 177–95 (182); Jonas Tinius, 'Rehearsing Detachment: Refugee Theatre and Dialectical Fiction', Cadernos de Arte e Antropologia 5, no. 1 (2016): 21–38 (29).

31. Balfour, 'Refugee Performance', 178.

32. Ibid., 191.

33. Ibid., 182.

34. Ibid., 191–2.

35. Tinius, 'Rehearsing Detachment', 22.

36. Ibid., 33, 34.

37. Ibid., 27–8.

38. Khatib qtd in Guardão, 'Celebrar os Mundos do Mundo, para Derrubar os Muros'.

In Balfour's view, a new aesthetics needs to suspend the audience's secure knowledge by switching from reality to non-realistic representation, thus extending fixed notions of refugeedom.[33] By diluting personal narratives into non-verbal representations for instance, fictional aesthetics may help audiences encounter otherness as an ethical experience.[34]

In a recent study that looks at a participatory refugee theatre project in Germany, Jonas Tinius also argues for 'fiction and detachment, rather than identification and authenticity'.[35] Tinius draws attention to yet another important perspective in this respect, namely that 'identification is dangerous' since it depicts refugee identities reductively *only* as refugees, hence mirroring dominant media portrayals.[36] He claims, that by introducing the fictitious into representing the real, fictional migrant theatre would 'allow for the creation of alternative visions of whichever stigmatised role is being enacted' and from the perspective of refugee performers, would 'invite the acting subject to engage in a process of deliberative self-cultivation'.[37] His concept of 'dialectical fiction' calls for an aesthetic form based on disassociation from the *real* and re-appropriation through the *fictitious*. Evidently, such aesthetics would act as political critique by resisting prevailing migrant representations based on racial, ethnic, or other types of classification (by authorities, media, and politics), but does it risk establishing a one-sided, purely metaphoric treatment of migrancy and refugeedom?

Certainly, in *Passajar*, migrancy was elevated to a metaphoric level: disassociated from real refugee journeys and complex identities to show geographical uncertainty (displacement) and the absence of a distinctive or clear identity. Once cultural labels were suspended, the performance promoted a multicultural and hybrid identity. As Haitham Khatib described the production: 'this piece is a mosaic. We took small parts of different lives to make up something that is different from all those lives'.[38] Indeed, such fragmentation was an important dramaturgical tool in *Passajar*. The audience constantly moved around the palace, watching in each room a solo, a duet, a projected image of refugee names in Arabic, or simply walking past performing bodies standing against a corridor's wall. Performance sequences acted as a gallery display, each piece forming a stand-alone visual, audio, or corporeal tableau of suspension. As we previously highlighted, such a dramaturgical organisation exposed the performers (refugees and non-refugees alike) to the audience's gaze and invited spectators to reflect on what they saw in the intimate closeness of crowded spaces. However, given the level of abstraction of the scenes, concrete ideological meanings were destabilised. Margarida Gonçalves's solo, for instance, operated as a satire. She played with a mobile spotlight and a world map, so as to create shadows on the wall of people crossing land and sea until the map (world) slid from underneath their feet and buried them. Conceived as a cartoon-like comic animation, Gonçalves's performance evidently reflected on uprootedness.

In yet another scene, the performers invaded a room filled with shoes. Developed as part of the rehearsal process, this communal choreography was also constructed as a metaphor. Closing all doors and windows, the

performers started to search frenetically in the sea of shoes, trying on a few and throwing away some pairs, then setting up roads, city-squares, and buildings with them. Such a symbolic utilisation of shoes has been played out in numerous performances. Nevertheless, this sequence evoked not only a real sense of lack of belonging, but also a hope in building a new existence from an object so overused and invaluable. Near the scene's end, the group walked around in their newly found shoes singing in multiple languages: '[we] arrived, but not to stay'. Yet again, this statement reflects on metaphoric displacement, but crucially, it references the controversial reality of European migrant quotas. In effect, some of the refugee participants were waiting for relocation to another European country during the summer/autumn of 2017.

Such concrete references to actual political situations were rare, but the final scene of the production also built upon a concrete refugee testimony, namely the following statement by Josephine Manjonjo (Zimbabwe): 'we are

Figure 2. Taking to the Streets – Closing Scene from *Passajar* at Festival Todos, Lisbon, 2017. Photo: Maria Ramos.

voiceless, we are oppressed, we can't speak, we don't have the freedom to assemble, and even if you speak out you will never be heard' (rehearsals, August 2017). This inspired the closing scene of the performance, during which all the performers exited the palace and ran onto the street, in a gesture of freedom, walking through a public space where there are no military tanks, no police forces, no pepper spray or tear gas thrown at them, a space where they can celebrate freedom and experience collective assembly (see Figure 2). Sara Ahmed maintains that 'migration is equated with a movement that already destabilises and transgresses forms of boundary making'.[39] By taking to the streets, the performance stressed a certain form of freedom that evokes self-empowerment and ultimately self-representation. By crossing physical and mental spatial frontiers, *Passajar* provided a communal experience, for

39. Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 81.

40. Azadeh Sharifi, 'Theatre and Migration: Documentation, Influences and Perspectives in European Theatre', in *Independent Theatre in Contemporary Europe*, ed. Manfred Brauneck (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017), 321–415 (390).

performers and spectators alike, 'to reflect [on] the semantic instability of constructions of (personal/cultural/national) identity'.[40]

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Although the celebratory mood of *Passajar* evades refugee testimonies and thereby ethnographic specificity, it nevertheless relates to a universalist stance that may be ethically effective and vital at this stage of human history. Because universal categories of the modernist past were markedly masculinist and colonialist, postmodernist theories turned away from universal notions and demanded instead a thinking that considers locality, difference, and specificity. However, when dealing with contemporary migrant trends and globalised deracination, we are at a critical point demanding an appeal to a certain kind of common ground and shared horizon, so as to trigger a novel human-rights ethics. Indeed, although struggles against injustice cannot ignore identity, a politics based on identity may prove to be reductive at present, especially because neo-liberalism has captured and commodified identity categories. As Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh argue, there is at present:

> a strong sense that identity-based struggles are politically limited and that a different type of grounded, collective action is in order. We are at a stage where neoliberal culture has virtually absorbed any agency that politicized identities were once presumed to have. […] We cannot continue to assume that a proliferation of identities simply protects the interests of minority groups, for to do so implicitly naturalizes inequality and the socio-political system that reproduces it.[41]

41. Causey and Walsh, 'Introduction', 2.

As an aesthetic intervention project, *Passajar* made an intentional attempt at renegotiating the relationship between complex refugee identities and dominant political representations and stereotypes, thus ultimately offering the possibility of rethinking what *foreign* means.

Ethics of a Dramaturgy of Affects

Powered by fictional aesthetics to dramaturgically deconstruct and re-appropriate otherness, *Passajar*'s performance established itself as an ethical space. Early on in the process, the collective realised 'the impossibility of reconstructing the totality of truth'.[42] As Maria Ramos formulated during one of the early rehearsals: 'you can never tell the story as just reality or just fiction' (July 2017). Consequently, the collective searched for an ethics that addressed shifting identities and narratives, directly engaging the creative team, refugee performers, and the audience within an ethical openness towards alterity.

42. Mounsef and Hussein, 'Performing Translocal Memory', 150.

43. Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 245–8.

44. Ibid., 21.

45. Ibid., 27, 45.

46. Alexandre Lefebvre, *Human Rights as a Way of Life: On Bergson's Political Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 117–18.

47. Mounsef and Hussein, 'Performing Translocal Memory', 155.

48. Szabolcs Musca, 'On Suspension of Walls: Towards a Humanist Agenda on Marginality', *Research in Drama Education* 24, no. 2 (2019): 240–9 (245).

49. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 173.

50. Alexandre Lefebvre, 'Human Rights in Deleuze and Bergson's Later Philosophy', in *Deleuze and Law*, ed. Laurent de Sutter and Kyle Mcgee (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 3–4.

51. Michael Balfour, *Refugee Performance: Practical Encounters* (Bristol: Intellect Publishing, 2013), 204.

In *Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion* (1932), philosopher Henri Bergson argues against normative morality, along with the prevalent interpretation of human rights that it advocates. Bergson notes that ordinarily we view human rights as a protection of our human status, but when faced with war or severe social crises, normative society temporarily suspends the application of human rights. War therefore reveals that the humanitarian principles upheld by normative societies are false.[43] This happens because such principles ensue from a 'closed ethics' that excludes and insulates its members from suffering outside the boundaries of family/group/nation to which they belong.[44] Hence, Bergson contests the idea (inspired by Émile Durkheim) that our attachment to the cause of human rights is achieved by progressing from small-scale to ever-higher stages of affection: from family to group, from group to nation, and from nation to humanity, at the summit. Differently, an 'open ethics' ensues from an individual's 'open soul' perception of the world; it includes and moves, it is open-ended, creative, and unsettled.[45]

Bergson therefore argues that what we really need is a universal mode of love to take hold in the world, so as to elicit joy, justice, attention, and empathy; this is the true purpose of human rights. In his view, love refers to an attitude of the soul, of exaltation and welcome: 'It is a disposition or a mood. It is a way of being in the world, rather than a direct attachment to any particular thing in it'.[46] Hence, human rights are not simply in the business of protecting life, they are not just a question of management or of juridical construction; rather, they need to be considered an expression of biological life itself. A different perspective on human rights inspired by Bergsonian philosophy should be affective and enable ethical practices of self-transformation.

In *Passajar*, affection and self-transformation were tangible in the physical and communal forms the performance used to 'connect self to the other' and to establish 'a renewed connection to the social world'.[47] For some of the refugee participants, this connection meant the first glimpse into the social world of the receiving country beyond the walls of the refugee centre. As Josephine Manjonjo observes: 'when we first came here you wanted us to blend in, you guys have been great, you kiss on the cheeks, in the culture we know and come from, we just shake hands!' (rehearsals August 2017). As for the theatre-makers, *Passajar* enabled a contact 'with migrant and marginalised realities never encountered before'.[48] *Passajar*'s ethical space was generated through the encounter between facilitators and refugee participants, between performers and audience.

Gilles Deleuze views the current concept of human rights as abstract and modelled upon a fixed and moralising theory of subjectivity. Not only do they inhibit movement and becoming, but they are also compromised 'with liberal capitalism of which they're an integral part'.[49] According to Deleuze, in order to be politically effective, concepts must 'respond to the case at hand, such that both concept and situation are recreated from within the context of their encounter'.[50] Michael Balfour also argues that refugee performance is 'not necessarily so much about knowledge of the other, or information about their situation' as it is 'about the ethical quality of the experience itself, about a certain kind of affect'.[51] This corresponds to what philosopher Baruch

52. Baruch Spinoza, A *Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and other Works*, trans. Edwin M. Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

53. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 214.

54. Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, 92.

55. Pierluigi Musarò, 'Humanitarian Tarzanism: The Discursive Tension between Inequality and Solidarity', *Cartografie Sociali. Rivista di Sociologia e Scienze Umane* 1, no. 2 (2016): 63–80 (68).

56. Ibid., 69.

57. Tinius, 'Rehearsing Detachment', 22.

Spinoza proposed in *Ethics*, namely that affects experienced by both body and mind are central to all ethical processes and outcomes.[52] As active affections/emotions, affects produce alterations and transformations in one's own mind-body that potentially increase or diminish the power of activity of the other's mind-body.

In the second last scene of *Passajar*, refugee and non-refugee performers emerged dancing in a group, and then extended the invitation to the audience in a gesture of genuine celebration. Indeed, this was a celebration of our encounter and of the joy over intersubjective connectedness through performance. The scene resembled a frenetic party where boundaries between performers and spectators were transgressed, generating a shared sense of belonging. Drawing on Spinoza's embodied notion of affects, Brian Massumi suggests that affects are unbounded and unfixed sensory intensities that induce action and liveliness. Affects interconnect us with otherness, and 'with intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life – a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places'.[53] When you affect something, you are being affected in turn, but the range and power of affect depend on our own affective loading, on how intensely we are living and moving, on our sense of belonging to and being in the world.

In conclusion, we believe that it is necessary to ask whether such humanist-driven fictional aesthetics may facilitate change in the perception and reception of refugees and migrant cultures. As Turner and Behrndt question, 'if meaning itself is destabilised, how can such a theatre make any coherent statement, or intervene in any effective way?'.[54] Musarò insists that humanitarian action should focus on changing and challenging the existing political and economic order that generates social injustice, gender inequality, environmental damage, conflict, and poverty, rather than legitimising it by merely offering a technical response to human rights emergencies.[55]

To start with, we would argue that it is crucial to consider that there are no natural borders separating human beings in space; borders are socially constructed.[56] *Passajar* offers a firm ethical frame for such a humanist approach, although it remains limited in sustaining empathy and fostering alternative visions that directly affect refugee representations on and off stage. Arguably, in order for this to happen, such migrant theatre productions should engage in both a relational and durational practice that is not confined to the temporality of a performance with a limited running time.[57] In other words, a more process rather than product-focused work would be acutely important in order to engage and re-engage with diverse personal and communal identities in performance and beyond – across various levels of creation, reception, and dissemination – challenging dominant (media) narratives of migration whilst further shaping the reception of migrant communities.