Theater and migra(tio)nts. Theatre, nation and identity: between Migration and Stasis

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Resumen

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Mientras camino entre los cuerpos adormilados de refugiados sirios en la estación de autobuses de Belgrado, tratando de dirigir mi esfuerzo humano al Otro, mi vida, súbitamente, aparece ante mí como expuesta. Y me asaltan preguntas como: “¿y si no hubiese dejado jamás esta ciudad donde mi madre creó una filial de la Cruz Roja en Serbia y donde mi abuela había escondido bajo su techo a varios bakuninistas en su emigración desde Rusia hacia los Estados Unidos?” Aquí, otras preguntas como “¿Es el arte aún posible?” o “¿Cuál su forma última y moribunda?” no me llegan. Y de igual modo, preguntas sobre el sentido de la “resistencia”, sobre el poder migratorio del pueblo o sobre la presencia de este poder o su ausencia en la vida cotidiana del pueblo.

Palabras clave
Refugiados, territorio, filtro, piel, fenomenología, membrana, E. Husserl, teatro corpóreo, Pablo Posada Varela, the Living Theatre

Abstract

As I’m walking among the sleepy bodies of the Syrian refugees at Belgrade’s bus station park, trying to address all my human and performative efforts towards the Other, my whole life appears suddenly in front of me as “ on a stretcher” : have I ever left this place where my grandmother founded the Serbian branch of the Red Cross, and where my grandfather was hiding the Bakuninists under his roof, on their way from Russia to the United States ? Here, the questions such as “Is art still possible?” and “what is its current dying form?” have never occurred to me, nor the questions about the true meaning of resistance, the migrating power of people and its dying absence or presence in everyone’s life.

Keywords
Refugees, Territory, Filter, Skin, Phenomenology, Membrane, E. Husserl, Corporal Theatre, Pablo Posada Varela, the Living Theatre.
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A: Idea of a migrant could be incorporated into the saying by Ovid: in this place I AM a barbarian because men do not understand me.

B: As to an idea of theater, any theater, for me personally the idea had to be extended (not reduced to) to the idea of the corporal theater, theatre which treats body as such, for what it is. The theater which tends to body and all its aspects, body being the basic unit of any theatrical activity.

It is interesting to notice that wherever I lived, I have always felt as a refugee: an artist in an inner, as much as an outer exile. True, no one has ever forced me to leave my homeland, former Yugoslavia as I had left it out of my own free will that distant 1980. I was neither Nabokov, nor Joseph Brodsky or Soljenitsyn. However, the merciless hand of High Capitalism tattooed with certain Stalinist slogans, has ruled my country, our schools and our artists and intellectuals. All of us have felt its rude consequences even under the reign of Tito. As I’m walking among the sleepy bodies of the Syrian refugees in a Belgrade’s bus station park, trying to address all my human and performative efforts towards the Other, my whole life appears suddenly on a stretcher in front of my eyes, and here comes a question: have I ever truly left this town where my grandmother founded the Serbian branch of the Red Cross, and where my grandfather was hiding the Bakuninists under his roof, on their way from Russia to the United States? Here, questions such as “Is art still possible?” and “what is its current, ‘disappearing’ form?”, have never occurred to me, nor the questions about the true meaning of resistance or its absence or presence in everyone’s life. The answers to these questions would impose themselves on me quite naturally. Let me dig into some fitting examples of the artistic practices concerning the Migrant Theater and the Theater of the Migrants that will help illustrate my quandary.
As I’m trying to sort out some basic terms operandi let us have a look at the notions of «migration», migrants and «the migrating forms of theatre».

As I worked with the Living Theater for a long time, for me personally the notion of LIFE, ALIVE and the LIVING have always meant Theatre and it included its various subterms. «The term migration is closely linked to the construction of the Other, the figure of the foreigner in our everyday realities, in the media, and on stage. The uprooted person, the migrant figure, whether political, economic or spiritual, often triggers tensions between the familiar and the unknown, native and foreign, us and them. Within the current global political climate, marked by the increasing rise of the right and of xenophobic sentiments, the term migration prompts us to grapple with a variety of contradictions of hospitality and hostility, of solidarity and security, of activism and passivity, of movement and stasis. “

In the interview (2015) focusing on hosts, migrants and hospitality in general, a leading anthropologist and politico-economic anarchist-activist David Graeber, founder of Occupy Wall Street movement, who also exiled himself, had a couple remarks to make on the notions of real and ambiguous hospitality:

“We are witnessing an incredible global control of the territorial borders and laws which govern their borders. Although we know that the technology has advanced a lot, we are still confronted with an incredible quantity of walls and of frontiers being imposed on us, virtual or non-virtual ones, the walls which cut our planet into a million separate pieces- until recently this was a sort of an abstraction to us and now it’s becoming our physical reality.... in the era of feudalism, people travelled from Africa to England, I don’t mean here the slaves, these travelers were not slaves, they would only enter another country physically, no one prevented them to enter some country.

The interesting thing is that they were welcomed pleasantly and warmly by the local inhabitants, the system of hospitality was highly developed and the host felt a moral obligation to welcome a stranger- he would bring the best food to him and feed him for three days. Perhaps if this guest overstayed the host could turn him into a slave- we will not enter here the psychological aspects or reasons for someone’s hospitality! The Austrian anthropologist Franz Steiner had written a lot about this problem, he wrote a doctoral dissertation, “On nature of slavery”, where he developed the thesis related to his personal experience- he himself was a refugee in England but at that time an already famous professor who had always said that people had been inviting him to visit them, wined and dined him,
asking him to read his interesting work- only to ask him all sorts of favors in the end, for instance- to wash the dishes.”

Further along, discussing the notion of the Other and his presence in a new environment Graeber remarked:

“It seems that in so called Western Europe- the administration and the government started to calculate how many refugees they could accept and which jobs these could eventually get, and where they would feel the best. Oddly enough, they came up with the calculus that the first and the best country for the refugees was Hungary!!...It seems that the National Front and their anti-immigrant politics are to be found today in those small towns and villages where the refugees would not land anyways. In France, for instance and in some other countries where the National Front is in action, their representatives live in those forlorn places spared by the immigrants. In London, for instance, the representatives of the National Front have never met the immigrants in person- as they live in those posh suburbs where the immigrants never go, and- if they were to meet some of them they wouldn’t even know what to say, what to ask, how to present themselves.. The Germans seem all of a sudden more tolerant in treating the refugees who arrive there now. I would like to emphasize the fact that the Germans had not entirely created all the forms of torture or behavior towards the minorities during WWII- all these forms had already existed in the big colonial empires: the concentration camps, the bureaucratic consenses and lists of special citizens in Holland and in France, as well as the systematic avoidance of laws, and the double standard for the application of these laws to different groups of inhabitants, as prescribed by the Geneva convention when it was signed- these were not applied in their colonies. This is to say that in a conflict between the empire and say, the Zulu tribe, or in Ecuador, the laws from the Geneva convention were not respected in these territories. The arms that the empire used there were not even known as such in Europe, like those “dum-dum bullets” for instance. However, the Germans pushed the farthest the war terror as they decided to use the most drastic forms of armament over the population which they declared not white, though these people were seen as “white” by all other nations but the Germans.”

In discussing the relationship between the current politics towards the migrants and the Arts in general (here we’ll focus on Drama Studies), Graeber commented on Jacques Ranciere’s remark that politics and art build a fictive relationship, and that something that we see and what we do is just a part of that relationship. So what we do and what we could do in future is another part of that relationship. What kind of
relationship could be built between the refugees and the countries where they arrive?

Graeber agrees that there is a fictive, imaginary relationship between them – and he says that people project all sorts of desires when they meet with the foreigners; we observe here strange and perverse desires as they find these foreigners different from them, however we know that the precondition for building solidarity with the refugees is the feeling of equality and togetherness. Another thing is that people like to see the refugees as victims, they sympathize with them until the certain moment, they imagine themselves in a similar situation which causes them to have empathy, until the moment when these poor refugees start feeling good. Then their hosts’ feelings change, they start having certain doubts in regards to these refugees, now the question is- how do we overcome this feeling?”

Graeber also elaborates on the term migration which immediately invokes one of the central political, social, humanitarian and cultural issues of our time. It conjures images of people on cramped boats approaching the Italian island of Lampedusa and of people trying to jump on board lorries to cross the English Channel; images of dead bodies floating in the sea and of places left behind, turned to rubble; images of refugee camps from Dadaab in Kenya, the size of Minneapolis, to the infamous ‘Jungle’ in Calais. The notion of migration is intrinsically linked to questions of mobility and access as it evokes various performances of borders—for some they are porous, almost flexible, and for others they are impenetrable. The fences erected along the US and Mexican border and the India and Pakistani border, the checkpoints and walls separating Israel from the West Bank, the razor-barbed wire the Hungarian government installed on the border with Serbia to stop the influx of refugees: all these elements map the most extreme aspects of migratory geographies, playing out over and over again the Derridian hospitality/hostility paradox. Here, I’m quoting David Graeber again:

“The notion of Other does not include only fear but also the attraction which we feel towards the Other. Whenever I’ve read the Levinas observations about the face, human face I was hearing him, in a paradoxical way, as we are all the same, in the sense that we all come from mankind, that they are all different. Levinas wishes to point to the absolute uniqueness of each of us, of each face which we cannot entirely assimilate, which causes certain pain but
also an awareness in us that everyone is unique and special. And that it forms a part of the humanizing process, makes us human, this sort of constant appropriation of awareness that every human being is unique. As an anthropologist I am in a constant process of studying the Other and I am constantly aware that the Other is different and that we are constantly on the verge of an abyss of not understanding other culture, and the so called Other- we are reaching here the point of limitation in us- I often do not understand my own brother who is a great unknown to me.”

When asked to reflect upon Karl Marx’s economic postulates which would ultimately claim that the refugees and the migrants are not such a weight or burden on Europe, Graeber explained that these could be a source of investment for Europe which needs a greater working force. That force is neither physical nor ‘intellectual’, and it represents “the force of immaterial labor” as Tony Negri called it. Graeber further continues:

“If I could draw a certain parallel- in North America the situation is clear: until recently all immigrants without papers there had a status which was worse than any pariah’s- they were not allowed to vote nor they had any other rights. They did not have a syndicate which would allow them to speak out, and only recently there started a movement for civil rights which allows for these people to speak out. At the same time the immigration coming from Mexico becomes ever prominent in the US, and the politicians on the top are constantly reflecting whether they should throw them out of the country or not- they cannot agree on this issue- and what these immigrants are today is exactly what the capitalist class has always been fighting for: to have a group of people who have no legal rights and who don’t have a workers’ syndicate capable of defending their rights. As they don’t even have a right to have a syndicate, these people are in a legal limbo. So here we are talking about work which is legally outlawed. These illegal workers have no rights and they swim in the waters where everyone can throw them out at any moment and this is exactly what the capitalists want”.

This problematic is widely explored in Silvina Landsmann’s experimental film HOTLINE which describes a daily work of a NGO in Tel Aviv, the agency which fights for human rights of the migrants coming from Sudan and Eritrea to Israel. The questions of right for the asylum and the feelings of non-hospitality in the nation composed entirely of refugees are raised here. But not only domain of film treats the problem of migrant workers- the medium of theatre always treats the problematics
of the Double and has started recently conceiving its role as the major mediator between the Double and the Other. Several issues are at stake here. As Graeber again pertinently remarked, one of the problems starts when “the migrants who move into someone’s territory want to take leadership over the territory where they have just landed— if the Syrians wanted to take leadership in European countries where they have just arrived, that would be a problem. After the II World War the Europeans thought that they had to do something, at least partially for the Jews, and as it was not possible for them to give the Jews a part of the European territory, they decided that the Jews should be directed towards Palestinian lands. You see how that thing got totally complicated as the Jews were originally Europeans as well. This is all a very sad story—when I moved to London in a quarter called Bethlehem Green one could still find numerous synagogues. However, through certain municipal decrees by the end of 1990s, the Brits started moving Muslim refugees into this quarter, telling them “this is the area where you are going to feel at home”. This is just one of the examples which show how the Zionist politics has done the most harm to the Jewish population itself.” And again, beyond its immediate, topical invocations, the terms migration and migrants implies, more broadly, a body of persons or animals migrating together. These moving migrating bodies range from the political to the economic and to the spiritual; from refugees and asylum seekers to tourists, guest-workers, and visiting scholars; and they even stretch beyond human migration to include other kinds of migrating bodies—inspiring us, perhaps, to think of migration as a kind of a performative ecology that involves a wide variety of agents, processes and geographies.

Migration understood as an act—a form of being/doing—unfolds within different socio-political scenarios and through a repertoire of performative and affective gestures making possible for both individual and collective aspects to emerge. Dictionary definitions also describe the term ‘as movement from one part of something to the other’ — which includes both spatial and temporal dimensions, individuals, communities, animals, but also forms, ideas, aesthetics, and conventions. Thus, migration emerges as ultimately a relational category. In chemistry, it means a change or movement of atoms in a molecule. In physics, it means diffusion—the intermingling of substances by their natural movement. Applied to culture, these
attributes of migration also suggest the spreading, mixing and remixing of forms and ideas. Hence, migration does not unfold in a straight line; it is rather a process of moving from one point to the other that necessitates meandering, wandering, changing of pace, transformation, negotiation, and adaptation.

The contemporary theater is highly aware of all the different problems which rise with the relocation of migrants to someone’s territory. There was a conference recently given in April 2018 at la Sorbonne which tried, through the work of the current contemporary theater companies to answer some of the following questions such as: how have theatre and performance responded to the issues of exile, displacement and Otherness both historically and in our times? How has the process of migration been shaped and reshaped through various political, social, cultural and artistic scenarios? How can the notion of migration be employed to grapple with issues of cultural cross-fertilization, transfer, appropriation and mutation? What does constitute ecologies of migration in theatre and performance (and beyond)?

Within the scope of the seminar VALE, Elisabeth Angel-Perez, Kerry-Jane Wallart and Jeanne Schaaf gave a report -summery on the work of the companies of the “Theatre of NON-LIEU”. The report was notably on the work of the virtual and nomadic Scottish National Theatre which moves from one city to another virtually and allegedly occupying the same mental space within the spectator as other companies physically do.

Another company worth mentioning here is ERRINA company founded by Anastassia Politi, a Greek director whose brother drowned in Italy doing his activist work on the migrants’ boat near Lampedusa island. ERRINA is a completely nomadic, migratory enterprise in terms that it employs theatrical settings, props and scenery on the spot, whenever it gives performances as it moves from Greece to France, from the north to the south performing the thematic units related to the migrants’ life, and is always on the move.

The visual artist Judith Barry is displaying her work entitled Global Displacement in the memory of the Lampedusa’s boats at Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in the states. She conceived her work in an inflatable boat, somewhat similar to the one that was drowned near Lampedusa filled with the collages of
asylum seekers and followed with the artist’s words «nearly 1 in 100 people worldwide are displaced from their homes». In this particular case boat is seen as the stage for daily life, that is living performances given by the asylum seekers. Looking up, the asylum seekers greet the effortlessly hovering drone with the mixture of relief and elation- even though the drone is not human, and even though the resulting encounter is no guarantee of a rescue or of entry into another country. There are hundreds of these images circulating online, says Pieranna Cavalchini, Curator of Contemporary Art. The refugee crisis is on-going and shows no sign of abating.

According to Pablo Posada Varela, a contemporary philosopher of phenomenology, the question of frontier is very old and profound as it touches the essence of human being. What is a frontier anyway? Is it something that distinguishes our interior from the exterior in a human being?; By definition it is not an impenetrable wall but more of a filter. A human being is above all an animal, a living being which moves and that’s the first quality which distinguishes it from an inanimate object. The man recognizes its exterior by the limit imposed by his skin; this membrane and this frontier saves his interior from spilling to the outside world. But this membrane is never conceived as the rigid wall, it is porous whose function is to protect, to assimilate and to evacuate, Pablo Posada Varela says. If we exposed this frontier too much, it would be destructive for our interior, but an excessive closure would lead the body to natural death. This frontier, our skin, defends our interior which is, according to the philosopher «transcendental» and which is also different from the man’s «visceral» interior. A man, as an animal, has a constant need to move, to conquer his territory outside himself, but his own territory is designed by his skin which guarantees him certain serenity and defends him from climate, and from other animals, but the man seeks an exterior territory which is secure and which the animal counts on in order to survive. When basic security of his territory disappears, the man as an animal moves in order to find another territory and in this basic instinct lies the phenomenon of migrations. The skin as the protective denominator does not always protect the body, that’s why we put additional clothes on it, in order to save the energy of our interior. We add to the clothes protection provided by the house, then the roof, a city and then the country, a supplement of the «membranes» to protect our interior. But these membranes, as we have seen have a double sense, they
are just the filters. Our body has bladder and openings on it, the house does not consist only of walls, it has windows, doors and other openings. The body itself if it wants to survive, it has to be able to «go out». A space without openings is either a tomb or a prison; thus humans build these transitional places where they grow up, where they can retreat and the frontier conceived in those terms is visceral and already included into the bio-topology of man's nature. However, Posada Varela says that aside from this so-called visceral determination of man's interior/exterior, there is a transcendental interior of a man, the sum of his experiences which he lived phenomenally. The man moves in his thought through the past, his presence and his future, his interior here has no frontiers and he moves his interior transcendentally, ignoring borders, now supported by the technological crutches, that is, by the virtual equipment. But here Posada says that despite the intricate specifics which we get today in technology, and regardless of all the prosthesis and mediation given to us by the virtual, it cannot replace the living experience of a certain subject. This sentiment of the experience lived here and now puts the idea of the virtual theater into an abyss if not garbage. The idea of phenomenology teaches us that the spaces that we mark by our presence and our experience are also the spaces that mark our interior. Therefore the migrants' theater can be seen as an osmosis of frontiers, our inner frontiers as well as the exterior ones which shape our experience, as much as we shape them by crossing them constantly. The presence of a human body is quite important in a theatrical experience, although, the virtual experience either in theater or in a psychiatric session via Skype is an experience highly acceptable and belongs to the realm of something which Marc Richir, a Husserlian scholar would name «a perceptive phantasia».

There are two theater companies which follow Richir's philosophical investigation, both of them work actually in Paris. They presented their work within the scope of the thematic festival EXILE which took place in LA MAISON des Metalos in the third week of May. The first show entitled simply Crocodiles or the Real History of a Youngster in Exil follows the original story of the author Fabio Geda contained in the book «There are Crocodiles in the Sea». Here, the excellent performance by a young Remi Fortin reveals a story of a young Afgani boy, Enaitollah, whose mother, fearing the massacre commenced by the Hazaras, first
smuggles the boy into Pakistan. Here the boy is left alone and during the five years he tells his story of a 9 year old who crosses the borders of Iran, Turkey and Greece all alone, until he finally reaches Italy. This piece in a form of monodrama (one-man person) is directed with a really great sensitivity by the French directors Cendre Chassanne and Carole Guittat. Although the directors are not themselves the displaced people, they skillfully manage to find both the intimate and universal words for Enaiat to address the audience so in the end the public can affirm that this humanist show transcends tragedy in its final message as it makes us believe in a possibility of true human openness and hospitality.

The second play entitled «Countries of Misfortune and Sorrow», and directed by Charlotte Le Bras is much less encouraging that the Crocodiles. It was mainly realized after the book written by Younes Amrani and Stéphane Beaud, the book which retells the «dark matter» or the problematic part of the recent French history, the one of their colonization, and the so called «assimilation» of the North African families who came to live and work in France. Very few authors would tackle this subject, and rightly speaking, they certainly avoid this particular thematic which has, from Camus up to recently Tahar Ben Jalun, provoked many authors to think about this complex issue. However, it seems that we have never had enough of this particular theme in France as the wounds are deep. Younes Amrani is a sociologist who worked in a public library in 2002 where he started rethinking the social issues, notably the suffering through which the generations of his parents- migrants to France, had to go through. Two actors and an actress in this play represent different voices of Younes who had listened in his youth the underprivileged voices of his cousins and friends living in a ghetto while fighting for human rights. The children of the immigrants are often more split apart in their fight for justice than their elders; they love the notion of the ancient country where their parents came from, but they also love the «new» country adopted by their parents which they call their home.

Here, again, the migrants' story is different from the story of the migrants fighting for «bare life», they are fighting for the recognition and an access to social privileges guaranteed to everyone in the democratic society. They all agree that «el ghorba» (exile in Arabic) is a condition which is utterly unfavorable, but it could be overcome but the willful means. In the play there is a voice of the Maghreb kid who has seen a
lot, just by growing up in his ghetto, in this «country of misfortune» as he calls it. He prefers prison to growing up in «freedom» where he is constantly humiliated and reminded that he does not have his real place in it. In 1996 the Maghreb encounters religion, becomes a «good Fundamentalist». The director and her company, les Papavéracées, magnificently explain throughout the play how the terrorism comes to be conceived and born in the West or in the «countries of sorrow and misfortune». In other words, as much as the Maghrebans, or the involuntary work force, present or are viewed as «a misfortune» to the Westerners in their lands, the same goes for the North Africans who view their hosts as the inevitable misfortune which fell upon their shoulders through the acts of colonization.

In conclusion: the problem of migrations and the migrants' stories I already tried to tackle in my book «11 Women Artists in Exile» which I published in 2011 in Paris. In this work, which follows the steps of Edward Said in his investigations, I tried to distinguish the phenomena of «bare life», bare existence and the «meaningful or the «thinking life», vita contemplativa, as Hanna Arendt would have it. The migrants have right to both. Often they are fighting for the first one only, and the presence of theater, of a theatrological situation attests to the presence of the second one. Walter Benjamin tries to distinguish both forms of living while discussing the notion of «the mythic violence: The application of mythic violence to life produces a very peculiar form of life, naked or “bare life”. Bare life is not simply natural or biological life but a product of legal violence: life as bare life is rendered as the natural bearer of guilt, a culpable life, which is, at the same time, the subject matter of the modern humanist “doctrine of the sanctity of life, which [the humanists] either apply to all animal and even vegetable life, or limit to human life” (SW 1, p. 250).

Benjamin, however, dares to ask what is sanctified in such doctrine – a doctrine, which is also the foundation of the modern idea of inalienable human rights. For Benjamin, the abstract subject matter of human rights is bare life – a life deprived of its supra-biological properties. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, the sanctification of life as such leads to a life without freedom, truth, or justice. From this consideration, Benjamin concludes that the “idea of man’s sacredness gives grounds for reflection that what is here pronounced sacred was, according to ancient mythic thought, the marked bearer of guilt: life itself ” (p. 251). The invention of life
and its culpability share the same origin, which is also the mythic ground of modern state violence, sanctioned and justified by the law. The theater which bases its praxis on these tenets has to take into consideration all the aspects of the living, the real, the symbolic and its imaginary issues.

In “11 Women-Artists, Slavs and Nomads”, my book on the exiles, I also remembered Hal Foster's notion of the “abject art” which discusses the “vulnerability of our borders, the fragility of the spatial distinction between our exterior and the interior, as well as the concept of self in a crisis embodied in the cut of the dismantled body whose chopped off members now independently follow their own “game of chess”. Finally, we may conclude here that such a traumatic cut is productive because it evacuates and raises the subject, showing us that the totality is an illusion as it also confirms its existence only in multiplicity, in a dynamic interaction of the whole and its segments.

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