

THE CAMP AND THE JOURNEY: AESTHETIC ENCOUNTERS WITH FORCED MIGRATION¹

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Abstract: With reference to Sara Ahmed's analysis of the stranger as figure and Mieke Bal's term "migratory aesthetics," this article considers some of the affective qualities and ethical challenges that emerge in recent artistic work that features forced migration. It focuses on three examples: Law of the Journey (2017), an exhibition by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, The Jungle (2017), a theatre play by Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy, and CAMPQ (2019), a collectively created immersive performance. The article examines the ways each of these works generate environments of encounter with the refugee migrant, in which the camp and the journey operate not only as thematic content, but also as affective propositions for audiences, viewers, or participants. The modes of recognition and relation these works afford or foreclose are assessed through discussion of the aesthetic strategies they use – namely, installation, immersion and participation.

Feel! –

Feel! Feeling finds Justice – Justice finds Mercy –

And then you stand up

To defend refugees!²

The poster for *The Suppliant Women* features a fair-haired white woman with her back to the camera; she seems to be on a boat and holds aloft an orange life vest

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² David Greig, *The Suppliant Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017) 24.

on a stick while she waves at a distant shore. In October 2016, David Greig's version of Aeschylus's *The Suppliants* opened at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh. Aeschylus's play, which dates from 463 BCE, the first of a tetralogy the remainder of which has largely been lost, is remarkable in having a chorus of fifty women as protagonists. Greig's version, which follows closely the flow of existing translations but uses a rhythmical modern diction, was performed by a blended cast of amateur and professional actors using dialogue, choreographed choral chants, and song. Greig's adaptation portrays the Danaids as doubly vulnerable – as asylum seekers and as young women in terror of sexual assault. In publicity material across diverse media both Greig and the director Ramin Gray stressed the play's relevance to a contemporary discourse around human rights and migration. Review after review of performances (the show premiered in Edinburgh and was remounted with new choral members in London, Dublin, Belfast, and Hong Kong) expressed surprise at the topicality of a play some two thousand five hundred years old. Significantly, Gray's "Director's Note" to the published text links the dawn of Athenian theatre with the dawn of democracy, arguing that "it's salutary to revisit the moment when these ideas were conceived and in the simplest ways to start to renew our commitment to being together in a shared, civic space."³

The affective urgency of *The Suppliant Women* could hardly have come as much of a surprise, yet its sequence of appeals and outcomes – feeling, justice, mercy, solidarity – could hardly be taken for granted either. By the summer of 2015, Europe's attention was grimly concentrated on the latest surge of forced migration. The impacts of the Syrian civil war, the conflict in Afghanistan and oppressive regimes in Iraq and Eritrea, all coalesced in a humanitarian disaster washing up daily on the coasts of the Mediterranean that was to continue apace throughout 2016. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) statistics, over a million migrants and refugees arrived in Europe by sea and an estimated 34,000 arrived via Turkey on foot in 2015 alone.⁴ The European Union's responses that ranged from Angela Merkel's "open door" policy, controversial quota systems or latterly, attempts to restrict the flow of migrants at source through agreements with Turkey and Libya have been accompanied by intense public debate and a spectrum of reactions from xenophobic anger to humanitarian activism.

³ Greig, *The Suppliant Women* 24.

⁴ Jonathan Clayton and Hereward Holland, "Over One Million Sea Arrivals Reach Europe in 2015," *UNHCR*, 30 December 2015, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2015/12/5683d0b56/million-sea-arrivals-reach-europe-2015.html> (accessed 30 November 2020).

In her extensive work on aesthetic responses to migrancy, Emma Cox investigates the ways the migrant becomes emotionally legible, how the tropes “by which we *recognise* [...] migrants and migration” condition our understandings of “the political present.”⁵ The tensions inherent in these processes of representation and recognition, as Aeschylus’s play and Greig’s adaptation attest, are both ancient and persistently contemporary. Cox notes: “whether it is thought of in terms of individuals [...] or collectives [...], migration is, at its heart, about encounters with foreignness,” requiring us to reflect on the terms of encounter, space, and movement, what is meant by foreign and the cultural construction of the stranger.⁶ Like Cox, I find Sara Ahmed’s *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* a touchstone here. Ahmed elucidates how the stranger as figure functions discursively in diverse ways ranging from threat to object of celebration. She argues that regardless of whether the figure of the stranger is negatively or positively conceived, the figuring itself is a gesture of “fetishism.”⁷ “Stranger fetishism,” she suggests, can be dismantled only through a “consider[ation of] how the stranger is an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, of incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities [...] as well as epistemic communities”⁸ – processes she describes as encounters with strangeness.

Drawing together these ideas of recognition, strangeness and encounter, this article explores the affective qualities and ethical challenges of recent artistic work on forced migration for audiences in European cultural contexts. Via three examples: an art exhibition *Law of the Journey* (2017), a theatre play *The Jungle* (2017), and an immersive performance *CAMPQ* (2019), the ways they generate environments of encounter with the refugee migrant are examined. As will become evident, the camp and the journey are at the hub of their respective semiotic systems, operating not only as thematic content, but also as affective propositions for audiences, viewers, or participants. I am particularly interested in the complexities of the experiences they offer, how migrants appear and are encountered, and in some of the consequences and questions their different aesthetic approaches entail. In unpacking the strategies used by the examined works, namely installation, immersion, and participation, some of the modes of recognition and relation they afford or foreclose will be assessed.

⁵ Emma Cox, *Theatre & Migration* (London: Palgrave, 2014) 8.

⁶ Cox, *Theatre & Migration* 4-5.

⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 3-18 (and *passim*).

⁸ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 8.

Sensing, Moving, Displacing

In his reflections on the politics of aesthetics, Jacques Rancière defines “[a]rtistic practices” as “‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility.”⁹ Embedded here is the etymology of *aisthēsis* as perception from the senses and contingent with it, the potential of the aesthetic to move the senses, to, as Rancière puts it, the “redistribution the sensible.”¹⁰ The capacity of the aesthetic to move our senses, to disrupt our perceptions as the basis of art’s political force, forms the point of departure for a number of recent critical conversations on art, migration, and displacement. Pivotal among these has been cultural theorist Mieke Bal’s coinage, “migratory aesthetics.” Bal emphasises how the focus of migratory aesthetics is not necessarily the migrant as theme or content, “a topic does not make an aesthetic [...]. What does make an aesthetic is the sentient encounter with subjects involved.”¹¹ Bal is reluctant to pin migratory aesthetics to a definition, rather she places it within a family of “concepts that attempt to establish an active interface between viewer and artwork” such as “‘relational aesthetics’ (Bourriaud), ‘empathic aesthetics’ (Bennett), or simply ‘political art.’”¹² While each of these pre-existing concepts come with various debates in tow, what Bal usefully adds is an acknowledgement of the cultural centrality of movement; hence

[i]n 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 [...] movement, once we notice its pervasiveness, is not an exceptional occurrence in an otherwise stable world, but a normal, generalized process in a world that cannot be grasped in terms of any given notion of stability.¹³

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004) 13.

¹⁰ See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 26, and *The Politics of Aesthetics* 40-42, 92.

¹¹ Mieke Bal, “Lost in Space, Lost in the Library,” *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art Making*, ed. Catherine M. Lord and Sam Durrant (Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 2007) 23-36.

¹² Bal, “Lost in Space, Lost in the Library” 23.

¹³ Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro and Mieke Bal, “Introduction,” *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency* (Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 2011) 10.

Building on the notion of migratory aesthetics, Sudeep Dasgupta extends an analysis of the relational dimensions of aesthetic experience with a focus on displacement to attend to the ways, “[t]he materiality of the art work always intervenes in the ‘theme’ it is supposed to convey.”¹⁴ The following sections focus on the ways each of the selected works share a concern with forms of radical displacement, but create spaces of affective encounter that have strikingly differing implications for the emotional legibility of the refugee and the ethical interface between spectator/participant and the work.

Economies of Scale: *Law of the Journey*

In March 2017, the National Gallery in Prague opened an exhibition of work by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei at the former Trade Fair Palace. At the centre of this exhibition was an enormous installation, *Law of the Journey* (2017), a piece that alongside *Safe Passage* (2016) and the documentary film *Human Flow* (2017), charted Ai’s response to the (then) current global refugee crisis and his own journey through forty refugee camps in 2016. Ai’s work is a provocation in several senses, demanding a recognition of human suffering and the need for an ethical response, but also prompting a consideration of what is at stake in the artistic mediation of the migrant as refugee and migration as crisis. As Marilena Zaroulia describes:

When migration is framed as crisis, excessive, severe measures for curing that pathology are put in place: detention camps, pushbacks of boats, barbed wire fences and legislation that frames the migrant in a perpetual limbo state beyond life and death. But while the sovereign nation-states introduce measures that regulate the terms of who can cross the borders and how, the figure of the migrant still exceeds, spills over and escapes the limits of rationality.¹⁵

Law of the Journey addresses this impasse through installation, an art form analysed incisively by Claire Bishop as “presupposing a viewing subject who

¹⁴ Sudeep Dasgupta, “The Aesthetics of Displacement and the Performance of Migration,” *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance, and Agency*, ed. Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro and Mieke Bal (Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 2011) 92.

¹⁵ Marilena Zaroulia, “Performing That Which Exceeds Us: Aesthetics of Sincerity and Obscenity during ‘the Refugee Crisis,’” *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 23, no. 2 (2018): 182.

physically enters into the work to experience it.”¹⁶ Installation art works, as Bishop outlines, might be categorised “by the type of experience that they structure for the viewer.”¹⁷ Of relevance here, and partially overlapping with Bal’s and Dasgupta’s vocabularies of destabilisation, is installation that seeks to decentre the viewer in order to produce an “activated spectatorship as politicised aesthetic practice.”¹⁸

I see Ai Weiwei’s *Law of the Journey* very much in this tradition, as work that is overt in its didactic agenda, yet reverberates with ambivalences generated by its own politicised aesthetic practice. *Law of the Journey* decentres its spectators through a play of perspectives. The viewer’s attention is arrested by the monumental presence of a 70-metre black inflatable boat with a cargo of 258 figures suspended at an angle in the large hall of the exhibition space. Nearby a couple of these giant faceless figures lie on the floor, as if fallen from the boat, while a number of other torsos wave for help from life rings. Pasted on the smooth grey tiles of the gallery floor beneath the boat, a sequence of quotations in Czech, Chinese and English from an international selection of writers ranging from Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, Václav Havel and Zadie Smith to Socrates and St Augustine, offer the viewer an assemblage of reflections on hospitality, refugees and belonging. Some sections of the walls of the hall are covered in strips of photographic wallpaper consisting of a collage of mobile phone images and selfies taken during the artist’s journey through the Mediterranean documenting his encounters with refugees in camps. Titled *Refugee Photos from the Film Project Human Flow* (2016), the thousands of snapshots of face after face, scene after scene in the refugee camps are intimate, banal and unartistic, offsetting the monolithic presence of the crowded boat.

The dimensions of the boat and its faceless passengers align the space in an oppressive way – the view is dominated by their presence. The height and mass of the suspended boat draws the gaze up, but it is impossible to see inside. The viewer is dwarfed by its solidity and its paradoxically floating heaviness. One can drift around the figurative sea space of the floor and under the boat, to read the citations glued to the floor. But as one moves along the sequence of citations, the reading becomes impeded by the downward slant of the boat. In this way, the space of literary and conceptual reflection on belonging becomes deliberately cramped, just as the ethical sentiments on which the viewer literally stands are overshadowed by the static mass of the refugee craft pressing towards them.

¹⁶ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate, 2005) 10.

¹⁷ Bishop, *Installation Art* 10.

¹⁸ Bishop, *Installation Art* 102.

A view from above, while available, is not immediately obvious. A first-floor gallery room with a viewing window onto the big hall permits a glimpse into the centre of the boat where huddled child-like figures are discovered. This room houses another part of the exhibition – an installation called *Laundromat* (2016) consisting of refugee clothing abandoned at the informal migrant camp in Idomeni, Greece. Once again the floors and walls of the room offer display surfaces; the floor is carpeted with laminated commentary from the media about refugees: some of it informational, some of it reflective, much of it hateful; on the walls ceiling to floor collages of photos and selfies from refugee camps repeat the material also presented in the hall below. The spectator is implicitly and explicitly encouraged to collate the camps and the journeys documented here with the traces of the displacements and devastation of World War II. The exhibition posters underscore the proximity of the gallery to the meeting point for the Jewish transports to concentration camps (Terezín specifically), while the accumulation of personal objects and clothing left behind by refugees seems to echo the exhibition of personal affects at the museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The message proclaimed throughout is that there is no refugee crisis, “only a human crisis.”¹⁹ Clearly the installation’s manipulation of proportion and perspective aims to activate the spectator’s sense of the extent and urgency of the situation, and the precarity of those lives swept along in its current. Ai Weiwei’s position as artist in relation to this crisis is validated by the exhibition’s promotional material, reminding us that Ai is “himself a refugee.”²⁰ Yet, it is obvious too that he is not a refugee like those presented here. Ai Weiwei’s other migrant works have drawn considerable criticism for their perceived narcissism and depoliticization of empathy.²¹ These issues also impinge on *Law of the Journey*; however, they coexist with a powerful interpellation of the viewer through an aesthetics of excess and displacement. This recalls Zaroulia’s understanding of the migrant figure cited above. Sandwiched between the monumental symbol of refugee journeying, that hovers in a state of perpetual limbo, and the minutiae of specific individuals, specific camps, and specific

¹⁹ Ai Weiwei, *Law of the Journey*, National Gallery Prague, 2017, exhibition leaflet.

²⁰ Ai Weiwei, *Law of the Journey*.

²¹ See Jonathan Jones, “Ai Weiwei is Making a Feature Film. I’m Worried,” *Guardian Blog*, 3 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/may/03/ai-weiwei-feature-film-refugee-crisis> (accessed 30 November 2020); Jerome Phelps, “Why Is So Much Art about the ‘Refugee Crisis’ So Bad?,” *openDemocracy*, 11 May 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/refugee-crisis-art-weiwei/> (accessed 30 November 2020). Some of these criticisms are unpacked and challenged in Zaroulia, “Performing That Which Exceeds Us” 179-92.

journeys too numerous to comprehend, the viewer's experience is one of oscillation between the objectification of the former and the subjectification of the latter. Both the troubling facelessness of the passengers in the boat and the 'facefulness' of the photographic wallpaper intensify the sense of dehumanization that insinuates our susceptibility to fearful, fetishistic attitudes to the refugee. In its production of such a migratory environment of (human) crisis, *Law of the Journey* proposes a decentring of the viewer's sense of position in the world, alongside a provocative demand for empathy.

Empathetic Legibility: *The Jungle*

The Jungle written by Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy opened at the Young Vic Theatre, London in late 2017. It transferred in 2018 to the Playhouse Theatre in London's West End and then to New York and San Francisco in 2019. Like Ai Weiwei, Robertson and Murphy's work emerges as an artistic response to their direct contact with migrants at the height of the crisis in 2015 and 2016. Both writers spent seven months as humanitarian volunteers in Calais at the infamous camp that came to be known as the Jungle, a place where by the end of 2016 up to 8,000 people were living in brutal conditions.²² Besides the need for food, shelter, and clothing, Robertson and Murphy were struck by the visceral need of the people they met to tell their stories. In consequence, they founded the Good Chance Theatre Company in September 2015, with the goal of providing refugees stranded in Calais with a space for cultural expression and exchange.

Working for refugees, with refugees and dedicated to telling refugee stories, Good Chance has developed activities in three areas. A main pillar of their practice is the building of temporary performance spaces in geodesic domes, called Theatres of Hope. A second is the Good Chance Ensemble, an international collective of storytellers who collaborate on various artistic projects. The third is Good Chance Productions, committed to creating professional theatre productions, that aims to share refugee stories in mainstream theatre.²³ *The Jungle*, which belongs among the last of these activities, is the one that has attracted most attention.

The Jungle is a drama set in the camp. Its cast of numerous characters documents the diversity of the community that includes refugees from

²² The name of the Calais Jungle (officially Camp de la Lande) is reputed to derive from the Pashto word "dzjanganal" meaning wood or forest. Figures vary as to the population of the encampment, the estimate cited is from the NGO Help Refugees in October 2016.

²³ See the Good Chance company website at <https://www.goodchance.org.uk/>.

Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Syria, alongside volunteers from the UK and a civil servant from France. The performance is structured in seven titled episodes that map the development of the Jungle and the stories of its various inhabitants. The first scene opens with the announcement of the partial clearance of the area by the French police in February 2016, the subsequent scenes scroll back to the beginnings of the camp in March 2015, the arrival of British volunteers in the autumn, and events leading up to the confrontation at the opening of the play.

That Robertson and Murphy fictionalized their experiences of this environment goes without saying, more interesting perhaps is to consider the aesthetic choices they made as they transferred those experiences to playscript and stage. Notably, their approach to the material is deftly realistic, grounded in a dramatically conventional handling of time, space and character. Each of the seven episodes offers a carefully balanced blend of dialogue and narration to build a progressive sense of the concerns and tensions within the soon-to-be dismantled camp. The action of the play is framed by a narrator figure, also a participant in the events. Safi, a literary-minded thirty-five-year-old Syrian, intermittently addresses the audience directly, providing an insider's view of the refugees' paradoxical situation, some background on a number of key characters, and a centring focus amid the multiple and diverse perspectives that crowd into view. Safi's presence bounds the ebb and flow of the scenes that portray the chaos and uncertainty of existence, as well as bonds of care and examples of resilience in this space.

Robertson and Murphy's dramatic writing disrupts "stranger fetishism"²⁴ by crafting a vivid sense of migrant characters as individuals – Salar, the Afghani who builds a restaurant against all odds, and acts as a father figure to the teenager Norullah, Okot the traumatized Sudanese boy, Ali the cynical Kurdish smuggler, Helene the young Eritrean who runs a church and a club at the camp and who finally applies for asylum in France. These are offset by the arrival of British volunteers in Scene 3 – Paula a swearsy activist who wants to protect children, Derek who is hankering for a sense of radical community no longer available in Britain, Boxer a heavy drinking handyman who has fled his ex-wife and abandoned his child, the teenage Beth who sets up a school even though she is barely out of school herself, and cerebral, Eton-educated Sam who plans to build emergency housing and assign dwellings according to an algorithm that determines need. The ironies of situation are kept in view throughout the scenes, maintaining a keen awareness of the disjunctions at work: for instance, the

²⁴ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 3-18.

refugees vote on whether to extend hospitality to the British; Beth and Sam concur that the camp at first sight is “like [...] Glastonbury. Without the toilets”; Boxer magnanimously declares “We’re all refugees”; or when Derek proposes renaming the Jungle, “Hope Town.”²⁵ The naivety, idealism, and mixed motivations of the volunteers repeatedly clash with refugees’ frustrations, suffering, and desire for control over their own destinies.

These contradictions bubble to the surface as the population swells and pressure from French authorities mounts. Reflecting on the nature of belonging, Safi asks: “When does a place become of a place? [...] When does a place become home?”²⁶ The inhabitants of the camp are caught between developing and defending a place that testifies to their displacement, that dehumanizes them, and taking an illegal “good chance” to journey on to the UK, where they are far from welcome. Although Safi has lingered in the camp, he finally angrily admits: “I thought this was a place, but it’s not. It’s between places. It doesn’t exist. We’re in burzakh, purgatory, waiting on the Judgement, in perfect view of the motorway, for everyone to see. A warning to the world. Don’t come. Don’t try. Refugees, migrants, whatever we fucking are. Not people [...]”²⁷ The volunteers, similarly, find themselves torn between their physical and emotional investments in the camp – Derek in particular begins to romanticize the Jungle as a revolutionary project – and the knowledge that such a place should not exist at all. Sam finally lashes out: “Fuck you, Derek! This is not a good place! It isn’t something to be preserved!”²⁸ The play opens with news of Norullah’s death on the motorway and the arrival of the police, by its end we learn that Safi has succeeded in reaching Britain and awaits the processing of his claim to asylum, Okot and numerous children have disappeared and the Jungle is no more.

Place and displacement are at the heart of the play’s thematics; they are also at the crux of its dramaturgy that attempts to create a performance environment that would intervene in what is usually seen and perceived. As already noted, the use of realism dovetails with a sense of authentic testimony and the desire to draw the spectator empathetically into the situations of the refugees. This effect was undergirded by the intricately detailed stage design created by Miriam Buether. Murphy and Robertson wanted audiences to feel part of the precarious, but communal, atmosphere the camp itself. In a promotional video for the show they explain: “The audience will come [...] into this bustling café and they will

²⁵ Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy, *The Jungle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017) 46-57.

²⁶ Robertson and Murphy, *The Jungle* 75.

²⁷ Robertson and Murphy, *The Jungle* 118.

²⁸ Robertson and Murphy, *The Jungle* 123.

experience what people experienced when they went into those places in the Jungle.”²⁹ Unsurprisingly, this environment featured heavily in the promotional material and became one of the show’s most remarked-upon features. Yet, as a space of encounter, it is freighted with contradictory potential.

The performance I attended in 2018 at the Playhouse Theatre in London’s West End offered an experience that enveloped the senses. Passing from the queue and security check in front of the theatre amid the busyness of Northumberland Avenue through the airy, gilt trimmed foyer to the auditorium already presents a sequence of strangely disjunctive spaces. Once inside, the extent of the transformation is impressive – the purgatorial “between place”³⁰ of the refugee camp has artistically materialized in the space of the theatre. The plush seating is gone, sawdust and mulch cover the floors, the proscenium has been boarded over and repurposed as a seating area; the upper levels of the auditorium are obscured with a drop ceiling and exposed lights; a raised runway stage is surrounded by rows of tables, benches and cushions, the walls draped with fabrics and hand-painted posters and slogans. The audience entering this area were greeted by members of the cast and directed to benches or cushions in specially designated sections of the Afghan Café blocked according to the nationalities at the camp and, it must be noted, ticket prices. Tea and naan were distributed round the tables along with a petition to protest against the clearing of the camp. The dress circle of the Playhouse Theatre, now named “The White Cliffs of Dover,” offered some spectators a view from a distance of the action below, however, those in the café were packed closely around the stage areas as performers moved through the crowd and in the central space.

The reproduction of the camp within the theatre and its invitation to become immersed in an experience of the place is inevitably not without keen ambivalences. Some of these are lucidly outlined by Emma Welton, who critiques the “confected closeness”³¹ of the performance and its staging. The production of empathy through such “dramaturgies of proximity,” she argues, “risk[s] spectatorial stasis [...] their emotions so implicated in the trajectories of individual characters surrounding them in the immersive staging, that their critical engagement with the broader structural issues which the play illuminates

²⁹ “The Jungle: Meet the Writers,” Young Vic London, 8 November 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TSJGu0xXzE> (accessed 30 November 2020).

³⁰ Robertson and Murphy, *The Jungle* 118.

³¹ Emma Welton, “Welcome to *The Jungle*: Performing Borders and Belonging in Contemporary British Migration Theatre,” *Theatre Research International* 45, no. 3 (2020): 235.

fades away in the distance.”³² Welton’s concern that “the strategy of intense immersion risks confecting an environment of dark tourism for the audience in the recreation of the Calais camp”³³ certainly deserves attention. She suggests that the use of Brechtian distancing techniques, rather than realistic and comic styles of presentation, would have been politically more incisive. While appreciating this perspective, it seems rooted in an overestimation of the potential of the show’s semi-immersive dramaturgy to activate spectators in a specific political manner.

Despite the fact that some spectators may well have felt thoroughly transported to the camp environment, it is perhaps more useful to reflect on the dislocations the staging produces and the ways such affects might be thought as a migratory aesthetic. I would concur with Matt Trueman’s impression of how *The Jungle*’s staging results in a “sharpening of the discrepancy between where we’re sat and what we see.”³⁴ The experience of watching this performance in a West End theatre may indeed be one of *communitas*³⁵ but it comes with an almost £50 price tag for seats in the middle sections of the café, not to mention an interval and drinks available at the bar. Rather than in a fantasy of immersion, the force of *The Jungle*’s “sentient engagement”³⁶ with its subject becomes palpable in the recognition of this dissonance and the realities of the world in which such a show appears.

It is far from a simple arrangement. Robertson and Murphy make no secret of their desire to prompt a nuanced conversation about the plights of migrants and refugees. *The Jungle* presents refugee stories, rendering them not only emotionally legible, to recall Cox’s expression, but bringing them into spaces where they apparently don’t belong – in this instance, into a West End theatre. The urgency of such an agenda is chillingly exposed when teenage Sudanese

³² Welton, “Welcome to *The Jungle*” 231.

³³ Welton, “Welcome to *The Jungle*” 237.

³⁴ Matt Trueman, “Review: *The Jungle* (Playhouse Theatre),” *WhatsOnStage*, 6 July 2018, https://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/reviews/the-jungle-playhouse-young-vic_47048.html (accessed 30 November 2020).

³⁵ The influential notion of *communitas* as a sense of fleeting but politically charged spectatorial togetherness derives from Victor Turner (“Liminality and Communitas,” *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* [Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing, 1969] 94-113), and is developed by Jill Dolan (*Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005] 10-34 and *passim*). It is also referenced by Welton in her analysis of the immersive devices used in *The Jungle*. See Welton, “Welcome to *The Jungle*” 235-37.

³⁶ Bal, “Lost in Space, Lost in the Library” 31.

refugee Okot explains to the well-intentioned Beth that “a refugee dies many times,” all that remains is “This journey. This story.”³⁷ As with Ai Weiwei, the question of Robertson and Murphy’s position as privileged mediators of “this story” lingers. As white, Oxford-educated men, their play ventriloquizes refugee narratives. But in its sharp criticisms of the failings and hypocrisies of Western responses, the play signals an acute awareness of the incongruities of the writers’ situation. It is a difficult balance, but one that, in my view, is productively counterweighted by the masterful embodiment of these stories by a multi-ethnic, racially diverse cast of actors, who perform for audiences as diverse as themselves, creating a temporarily “civic space”³⁸ even within the commercial theatre setting. In this space a recognition of shared humanity, precarity and privilege emerge simultaneously. The play offers no simple resolutions, but it closes with a remarkable gesture of impossible hospitality uttered by the narrator Safi, performed by Syrian actor Ammar Haj Ahmad: “I hope one day to return to Aleppo. When I do, you are all very welcome.”³⁹

Alien Encounters: *CAMPQ*

CAMPQ was a flagship project representing the Czech Republic in the 2019 Prague Quadrennial of Performance and Design Space. Billed as an immersive stage design production, it was an ambitious project that occupied a 1,500 m² area and involved more than 70 performers. Each presentation, admitting around 200 to 250 spectators, ran for around six to seven hours from nine in the evening until the early morning. *CAMPQ* was collectively created by Clàudia Cedó, Joan Yago, Marie Nováková, and David Košťák, in cooperation with Theatre Letí, Tygr v tísni, and South Bohemian Theatre, and was curated by Ivo Kristián Kubák. Catalan playwrights Cedó and Yago contributed to the development of the script under the auspices of the *Fabulamundi Playwriting Europe: Beyond Borders?* network in which Theatre Letí is a partner. It was directed by Martina Schlegelová, Ivo Kristián Kubák, Petr Hašek, and Tomáš Loužný. The first three presentations took place on the Štvanice island on the Vltava river in Prague; later it was presented for two nights in České Budějovice.

³⁷ Robertson and Murphy, *The Jungle* 83, 93.

³⁸ Ammar Haj Ahmad is an actor from Damascus. In 2011 he was cast in Dash Arts production of *One Thousand and One Nights* directed by Tim Supple. The production toured to Toronto and then to Edinburgh, during which time the outbreak of violence in Syria prevented him from returning home. He was granted asylum in the UK where he now works.

³⁹ Robertson and Murphy, *The Jungle* 135.

The premise of the installation performance is that spectators are to participate in the Open Day (or rather Night) of a special adaptation camp run by the Government Agency for the Integration of Extra-terrestrial Civilizations. The Czech pavilion in the main PQ exhibition space at Výstaviště presented itself as a tour agency desk where neatly uniformed CAMPQ staff wearing earpieces and ID lanyards welcomed those interested in visiting the site and directed them to a shuttle bus. The logos “Refuge, Belief, Hope”⁴⁰ and “Participation is Power” appear prominently on the wall of the pavilion and on the side of the bus.

We learn that the aliens residing in the camp arrived on earth some two years previously, when they were forced to leave their planets due to ecological catastrophe. Participants are invited to experience the camp, hear the aliens’ stories, and to evaluate who is sufficiently integrated to qualify for release into society. The population of the camp includes four alien forms; the first three, the Attas, the Zeyris, and the Phoenic Women, are humanoid, the fourth are mysterious crystalline life forms, nicknamed “hedgehogs.” In addition to the aliens, the camp is run by various humans who work as security guards, guides, agency representatives, healthcare workers and so on.

The affective contouring of the environment is meticulous and impressive. The perimeter of the site is marked by high, solid metal barriers.⁴¹ As they enter through the security gate, participants are informed of the rules of the performance and receive three yellow plastic tokens again marked with the slogan “Participation is Power.” These tokens may be given to the aliens who wear small cloth bags on strings around their necks, on the understanding that the three individuals who acquire most tokens would be awarded freedom to leave the camp. On view too is a vociferous protest against the granting of asylum to any aliens, with some spectators being recruited to hold posters and yell their opposition to integration. At the beginning of the evening two moderators collectively present the camp and its inhabitants to the crowd. Rows of seats facing a makeshift stage offer a more conventional spectatorial arrangement. The style of presentation is reminiscent of a circus or a game show, comically insinuating a grotesqueness inherent in the whole scenario into which

⁴⁰ At the pavilion, the slogan was “Refuge, Belief, Hope,” on the bus the slogan had become “Refuge, Believe, Hope,” though this is likely a spelling error rather than a deliberate transition.

⁴¹ Verónica Rodríguez examines the resonances of the use of containing devices in theatre works dealing with migration in “Theatre of Migration: Uncontainment as Migratory Aesthetic,” *Performing Crisis in Contemporary British Theatre*, ed. Clare Wallace, Clara Escoda, Enric Monforte and José Ramón Prado-Pérez (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

participants have entered for the evening. Then, everyone is free to explore the living conditions of the various alien collectives, to interact with them, and to distribute their tokens. In addition to a field hospital with a laboratory and quarantine area, a stage, an educational tent, and a café space, various containers supplied by the building firm Metrostav/Subterra serve as dwellings and rooms, and nearby the pods and nests of the Attas and Phoenic Women are dotted around and serve as micro hubs of performance activity.

As the first immersive production of this kind and scale in the Czech Republic, *CAMPQ* drew considerable interest in the cultural media. It is typical of a performance genre that has become popularised elsewhere for some time by groups like Punchdrunk among others. Considering the drift of these generic techniques, I contend, serves to illuminate some of the issues that arise in relation to the depiction of forced migration and the encounter with difference upon which *CAMPQ*'s concept rests. In his provocative assessment of the genre *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, Adam Alston observes how despite a plasticity of definition, a key distinction between forms of representational theatre and immersive practices lies in how the latter "centres on the production of thrilling, enchanting or challenging experiences, which feature as an important part of an immersive theatre 'artwork' that audiences co-produce by doing more than watching, or by augmenting the productivity of watching as a prospectively participating spectator."⁴² The immersive work strives to create, as is plain in *CAMPQ*, a fictive space or heterotopia, of which spectators become part. This can occur in a dramatically complimentary manner as in *The Jungle*, or can be the governing purpose of a work, as is the case with *CAMPQ*. Such spaces may be created within an existing theatre building, but more frequently repurpose non-theatre or site-specific locations. An emphasis on "audience productivity" is usual, where participants are incentivised to maximise their experience in ways Alston identifies as "narcissistic" and "entrepreneurial participation."⁴³ Concomitant with both is an introspective propensity, in that they turn attention to the experiencing self and to aestheticized experience. Immersive works regularly use some form of gamification as a means of motivating participants to reach certain goals or rewards, to discover secrets of the 'world' by roaming around it, and through self-selected encounters with performers.⁴⁴ These techniques tend to amplify the freedom of the participant to make their own

⁴² Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave, 2016) 3.

⁴³ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre* 7.

⁴⁴ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre* 10.

meanings and encourage the heightening of their affective expectations. However, the question of audience agency is moot, since participants within any immersive environment are already part of “a scheme of production which is assigned to them.”⁴⁵ The political and ethical dimensions of the arrangement are never too distant, but tend to be indirectly available; Alston notes how it is “rare that immersive theatre makers announce a political agenda [... the relation is assumed to be] *inherently* political.”⁴⁶

In *CAMPQ* these features, and their attendant issues, are immediately in evidence. The emotive politics of crisis migration fuels the spectacle. Participants are prompted, in the PQ catalogue description of the piece, to consider whether these beings have “a right to be among us? Are we able to integrate them?”⁴⁷ These are leading political and ethical dilemmas, yet they are displaced by bizarreries of the aliens. Kubák acknowledges the influence of the contemporary crises of forced migration and asylum, however as becomes progressively evident, this impetus is subordinated to the task of mining the scenographic promise of the camp scenario.

On closer inspection ironies multiply. The island’s name, Štvanice, recalls its use before the nineteenth century as a hunting ground; now, groups of theatre designers and performance enthusiasts wander the location in pursuit of the stories of alien refugees. The mixture of commercial sponsorship, artistic invention, authoritarian motifs, and entertainment, generates an ambivalent effect – one not without potential. The contribution of Metrostav/Subterra to the building of this containment facility⁴⁸ and the online electronics retailer Alza – their friendly bright green alien mascot who has apparently already been happily integrated into Czech society – are unavoidable in the camp space, enmeshing the world beyond the fiction with the fictionalized performance world within. But what are we to make of these juxtapositions and connections? Are we to critique them as instances of the corporate exploitation of crisis scenarios, or to treat them merely as a backdrop to the pursuit of the ‘real’ secrets of alien life in the camp?

The experience is much more inscrutable in its confection of immersive encounter than *The Jungle*. The power conferred by participation remains

⁴⁵ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre* 18-19, 23.

⁴⁶ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre* 11.

⁴⁷ *Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space Catalogue 2019* (Prague: Arts and Theatre Institute, 2019) 359.

⁴⁸ The connection with the emergency container housing provided for migrants in Germany is patent here.

wilfully obscure. Is it merely an empty slogan from the Agency for the Integration of Extra-terrestrial Civilizations that masks the realities of what seems to be a form of concentration camp? Is it a promise extended to the alien refugees, or is it rather a promise extended to those who have chosen to voyeuristically spend the evening with them? Being tasked with voting on the aliens' right to freedom places participants in an already compromised if superior position, a relation that suggests willing involvement in a semi-ironic game of dark affect tourism. Participants enthusiastically posed for selfies with the aliens and peered into their private spaces with pseudo-ethnographic curiosity. Whether the ethical implications of this situation were the subject of much reflection is debatable. Otto Kauppinen in his review of the evening notes how the manipulation of participants and the political dimensions of allusions to the migrant crisis, authoritarianism, populism, or even environmental crisis are never deeply explored by the performance.⁴⁹ Similarly, Tomáš Kubart discusses how the dramaturgical inconsistencies become more pronounced at the end when the collection of tokens is turned against participants and the Attas and Zeyris foment antagonism.⁵⁰

As an immersive scenographic extravaganza, *CAMPQ* raises some provocative questions. Central to these is its dehumanization of the refugee for aesthetic dividends, a manoeuvre that cannot be entirely deactivated through playful irony. The refugee as alien materialises as a set of comic exotic caricatures, attempting unconvincingly to acclimatise to Czech life. Stranger fetishism proliferates in the stylized spectacle of alien refugee types – the otherworldly and melancholy Phoenic Women, the antlike Attas tribe who subordinate themselves to their queen, and the Zeyris who are technologically advanced and have brought with them what might be a secret weapon in the form of the “hedgehog” crystals. Each consists of a handful of simple, essential characteristics that determine the contours of encounter and foster a basic recognition of difference rather than similarity. The textured and aesthetically attractive styling of the area and its alien characters is so accomplished that their function is “to be relished in their own right”⁵¹ rather than understood as a metonymy of political resonance or site of subversion.

⁴⁹ Otto Kauppinen, “Chci uvěřit...” (I Would Like to Believe...), *Divadelní noviny*, 24 June 2019, <https://www.divadelni-noviny.cz/campq-chci-uverit> (accessed 30 November 2020).

⁵⁰ Tomáš Kubart, “‘A teď jste všechno zkazili!’ CampQ” (“And Now You Have Spoilt Everything!” CampQ), *Teatralia* 22, no. 2 (2019): 268.

⁵¹ Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre* 219.

Ideally, the immersive genre contains within it a space of self-discovered meaning and responsibility. Migration is an extremely divisive issue in the local context. Czech attitudes to immigrants and refugees are statistically strongly negative, with a tendency to severely overestimate the population of migrants and refugees in the country: that is reinforced by media misrepresentation and open state-level hostility to European Union measures on asylum.⁵² The figures of the migrant in *CAMPQ*'s scenic spectacle problematically seem to take for granted a sense of distance, non-integrability and, by the end of the performance, the threat posed by the invading alien. Even though it could be assumed that few of those who created or participated in the work would hold such values, *CAMPQ*, despite its ironic self-awareness, misses an opportunity to adequately destabilize the participant's position within the fictive space or to disrupt an all too familiar negativized discourse of invasion circulating in the non-fictive social situation.

Migratory Aesthetics: Towards Civic Spaces

This article began with a reference to David Greig's *The Suppliant Women* and a moment when the chorus of young female refugees makes affective appeal to persuade the King of Argos to offer them asylum. The trajectory from seeing and feeling to action that appears so forcefully in *The Suppliant Women* is optimistic, but insecure. Rancière contends that "[t]he arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible."⁵³ As I have explored, artwork about migrants and refugees involves encounters with the other and the stranger that often seeks to provoke a critical redistribution of the sensible by encouraging the spectator or participant to critically consider their own place, the sense of which, following Bal, is always already infused with the migratory. The outcomes of such provocations are complex and often problematic, drawing attention to the positionality of not only the spectator or participant, but inevitably also the artist. An area of particular ambivalence is the configuring of the aesthetically mediated refugee migrant as a

⁵² See, e.g., Dušan Drbohlav and Kristýna Janurová, "Migration and Integration in Czechia: Policy Advances and the Hand Brake of Populism," *Migration Information Source*, 6 June 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/migration-and-integration-czechia-policy-advances-and-hand-brake-populism> (accessed 30 November 2020). In 2020 the Czech Republic, alongside Hungary and Poland, opposed the EU Commission's Pact on Migration and Asylum.

⁵³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 19.

type or figure essentialised as helpless victim, threat or melancholy outsider; more positive possibilities, however, can be traced in the ways such aesthetic encounters place and displace the spectator or participant in relation to matters of empathy, belonging and, implicitly, hospitality.

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